CLAWHAMMER RANCH

FRANK C. ROBERTSON

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By

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THE BOSS OF THE TUMBLING H, ETC.

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CLAWHAMMER RANCH

I

A BROKEN DREAM

Ed Boyce stopped his horse and gazed hard at the dim trail he had just cut across. With a keen, experienced eye he diagnosed the jumbled marks in the dirt and knew that they had been made by the band of pure-bred Percheron colts he was looking for. The tracks were not an hour old.

With a grim smile on his youthful but weather-beaten face, he followed the colt tracks, keeping his horse at a fast, running walk, but not missing a thing on either side or ahead of him. He knew he had been lucky to miss the colts so soon after they were stolen, and if his luck continued, he would soon come to grips with the thieves.

Boyce had been in charge of the big Clawhammer outfit less than a week, and the systematic pillaging which had discouraged the former owners was going on without a break. The twenty head of colts he was pursuing were worth well over a hundred dollars each, and he wondered why they had not been stolen before. However, they had been kept in a pasture close to the ranch house, and perhaps the thieves had feared the former foreman. Anyway, when Ed looked out of his window at daybreak that morning, the first thing he noticed was the absence of the colts. Buckling on his gun, he had walked leisurely out to the corral and saddled a horse. None of his men were up yet and he had not aroused them. But just as he was mounting, Quall Bidwell had strolled out from the bunk house. Ed saw the fellow's eye narrow as he took in the gun which Ed had donned for the first time since coming to the Clawhammer. Bidwell's eyes had roamed for one fleeting moment toward the colt pasture, and then, without a word, he had walked on toward the corrals.

Instantly into Boyce's mind flashed a warning that he had received from the banker in Daggett who had just learned that he was taking charge of the Clawhammer.

"There are some mighty worthless people up that way, and the worst of 'em is the Bidwells. Look out for that bunch."

Boyce mentally resolved that he would. He had been somewhat surprised to find two of the Bidwell boys, Hank and Quallman, working for the outfit, but he could not discharge them on the strength of a rumor. Now, however, the first thing he did was head for the run-down Bidwell ranch on Grizzly Creek, instead of wasting time looking for tracks at the pasture. If the horses had been taken that way, he knew some effort would have been made at the start to muss up the trail, but he shrewdly guessed what point he would strike it if he cut straight across, and it had proved correct. The colts were being driven into a thickly timbered area within a mile or so of the Bidwell place.

His horse suddenly raised its ears and Boyce brought it to a swift stop. A minute later a horseman appeared on the top of a ridge a quarter of a mile away, headed for the Bidwell place. The man was riding a calico horse which any one who had ever seen it before could easily recognize. Three days before a third Bidwell brother, Roy, had been at the ranch to see Hank and Quall, and he had been riding this calico horse. At the distance Boyce could easily recognize the rider by his old, floppy hat as well as the horse.

For a moment Boyce was tempted to ride after the fellow, but his most important business was to retake the colts. If he found them in the vicinity, as he believed he would, he would have evidence enough to bring a charge against Roy Bidwell anyway.

He rode on and, a mile farther along, he heard the shrill whinny of a colt, and guided by it he came upon a corral neatly concealed in a wooded cove. The little band of colts was gathered at one end questioningly watching his approach.

"Hid 'em here in the daytime so they could be fogged clean outa the country at night," Boyce ruminated aloud as he rode up and let down the bars.

He had leaned over to let down the second one when something whined over his head with a vicious note of inquiry as to his whereabouts. Before it ceased, he heard the boom of a rifle that had sent it.

Alarmed as he was, Boyce finished letting down the two remaining bars and, before straightening up, jabbed his horse wickedly with the spurs. The animal sprang a good six feet, and just in time, for a second rifle bullet severed the atmosphere exactly where his body had been.

"That bird ain't foolin'," Boyce breathed, as he dashed into a clump of quaking aspens at the risk of being knocked out of the saddle or getting some hard bumps on his legs. He was armed only with a six-shooter, and he had not discovered the source of the bullets. He yelled at the colts, and fired a couple of times behind them with the result that they made a wild break for the dropped bars, and went tearing down the cove.

There would be plenty of time to pick them up again and get them home, so he turned his attention to the matter of locating the sniper and, if possible, returning the compliment. Sticking to the timber, he angled his horse up the sidehill, without, however, sighting his enemy or drawing another bullet. Although certain that he had dodged the man who had done the shooting, the chances of finding him were too remote to justify a long search, in which he would be in as much danger as the other. Anyway, he had got his colts back, and he felt he had evidence enough as to the identity of the thief. He believed that Roy Bidwell had either seen him trailing the horses, or else had returned for some unknown reason. Giving up the search, he rode rapidly on the trail of the colts.

He picked up the colts three miles from the corral and hazed them back to the ranch. The whole episode had taken little more than two hours, but his mount, as well as the colts, were dripping sweat when they stopped.

A man rode out and opened the corral gate and closed it when the colts were inside. His name was Jack Parmer. The other four men who composed the crew were standing a little to one side, and all of them had their horses caught and saddled. Boyce gave them one fleeting but comprehensive glance and then swung down to the ground.

"Golly, boss, where'd yuh find the colts?" Parmer asked. "We hadn't even missed 'em till we seen yore dust comin' back."

"No?" Boyce queried with a peculiar inflection. Leading his horse by the bridle reins held in his left hand, he approached the others. "Funny none of you fellows knew these colts were gone," he remarked. "Especially considerin' where I found 'em."

There was a period of painful silence broken finally by Hank Bidwell. "Yeah, an' where'd yuh find 'em?"

"In a corral right close tuh the place you live," Boyce stated evenly. He did not have to voice his suspicion any more clearly for them to know what he meant. It was a direct accusation and they could not mistake it.

The four men shifted uneasily and Hank Bidwell, who was an ugly, reddish complexioned fellow with stooped shoulders and badly bowed legs, laid his hand menacingly upon his gun.

"Are you insinuatin' that we had anything tuh do with 'em bein' there?" he demanded.

Boyce realized his peril. If it came to a show-down, all five men would be against him. There was murder in Hank Bidwell's eyes, but Boyce felt that the younger Bidwell, Quall, would be the more dangerous. Quall was a husky fellow, bigger than Boyce, though the latter stood five feet eleven and weighed a hundred and seventy-five, and he was as black as Hank was red. His features were a study in viciousness and greed. Not once did Boyce take his eyes from Quall's hands.

"I'm not saying that you helped to steal these colts, Bidwell; but as the thief happens to be a brother of yours, and I'm going to have him prosecuted, I don't think you'd care to keep on workin' here, an' I don't think I want you. Come up to the house, you and your brother, and get your time."

"By Gawd, if yo're sayin' that me an' Hank is horse thieves—" Quall roared with a voice like a Hereford bull. The fellow stepped forward belligerently, his big fists clinched. Boyce saw that there had to be trouble and it was better to decide it with fists than guns if they wanted it that way.

"Was yuh goin' tuh hit something?" Boyce asked softly.

"Yes; by Gawd, I was," the man bawled, and let drive a cannon-ball right. Ed Boyce was no trained boxer, but he had agility and knew instinctively what to do, and he had the power to think quickly. He blocked Quall's blow with his forearm, stepped in and shot a straight right to the neck. Nobody clouted on the Adam's apple with a bare fist backed by a hundred and seventy-five pounds of solid flesh can ask for another one. Unable to breathe, convulsed with pain, Quall Bidwell seized his throat and went around in circles.

Boyce whirled to face the others, and his hand dropped to his gun. Seeing Quall utterly discomfited, they had all, with the exception of Parmer, started forward to gang up on the unpopular boss. Boyce's swift draw of his gun caught them on one foot, and in no position to resort to their own weapons.

"If it's trouble you're asking for, gentlemen, I'm right ready to oblige," Boyce said with deadly coolness.

"You got no right tuh say we're thieves," Hank faltered.

"I didn't say you were. I said your brother Roy was a horse thief, and I don't care to have his brothers working for me," Boyce said crisply. Momentarily, the range vernacular had forsaken his tongue. His manner radiated authority, and these men, accustomed to taking orders, involuntarily cringed. Besides, something he had said caused them to look at each other wonderingly.

"Roy—yuh say Roy stole them colts?" Hank half gasped.

"You heard me. I saw him right after he'd put them in that corral. He goes to the penitentiary. And while I'm on the subject, let me say that I'm prepared to stop all crookedness on the Clawhammer. I mean business. I'm not saying anything about the man who had charge here before I came, but the outfit has been systematically gutted and it's going to stop."

Boyce turned to face Parmer and the other two men. "If anybody here has got the notion that I'm not going to be boss or that I don't mean what I say, he can come up to the house with the Bidwells and get his pay."

Parmer was young—not much over twenty. George Weeks, one of the others, must have been nearly fifty, and he was only slightly more prepossessing than Hank Bidwell. The other man, known to Boyce only as "Skelly," was past thirty, and of a type common enough wherever there is opportunity for crookedness.

"This row is nothin' tuh us, an' as fur as you bein' boss is concerned, we're agreeable so long as yuh sign our pay checks," the man Weeks answered.

"All right. But I'm watching every one of you, and I expect work in return for those checks you mentioned. And don't get the idea that I can't get men to take your places," Boyce told them.

By this time, Quall Bidwell had found a place to sit down, and he was still nursing his neck. Boyce unsaddled his horse and walked to the big but weather-beaten old ranch house of which he and Hung Fat, the Chinese cook, were as yet the sole occupants.

"You hittee Quall Bid' plentee ha'd," Hung Fat grinned. "Me watchee thloo window. Boss man watchee out. Bullets hit plentee ha'd, too."

"Thanks, Hung; I'll be careful." Boyce walked to the desk he had inherited from his predecessor and figured out the amount of wages due the Bidwells. It was no great amount, and he wrote out their checks and signed his name to them. Just as he finished the Bidwells slouched in.

"These checks are all right, I reckon?" Hank asked insultingly.

"If they're not, you'll soon find it out," Boyce shot back.

Hank seemed to take a great interest in the checks. They were upon the State Bank of Daggett, and were signed by Boyce as manager for the Murray Loan & Trust Co.

"Who's this Murray comp'ny?" he growled.

"That's nothing to you so long as you get your money," Boyce said curtly, and waved the men outside. It was not the first attempt that had been made to pump him about his employers.

As a matter of fact, the Murray Loan & Trust Co., as mortgagee, had been obliged to take over the Clawhammer property from the previous owner, a city man who, after ten or more years of failure to obtain a profit, had refused to send any more good money after bad and had thrown up the sponge. Through the years the old manager, Brigham Highhouse, had contrived to convince the owner that it was not his fault. He had been prolific with excuses and alibis, but the trust company had decided at once to supplant him.

Ed Boyce had been chosen on the recommendation of a retired cowman whom he had long worked for, and who was now a heavy stockholder in the company. Uncle Tom Ambergate had retained his faith in the cattle business and in his fellow men. With great difficulty, he had prevailed upon the trust company to hold the Clawhammer ranch and stock as an investment instead of unloading it at a certain heavy loss. The directors had finally agreed—if the right man could be found as manager. Uncle Tom had recommended Boyce as the right man. They had deposited a sum of money in the local bank for Boyce to draw upon and told him to go ahead. For his friend Ambergate's sake, if nothing else, Boyce meant to make good.

After the Bidwells had taken their departure, Boyce got in his car and headed for the town of Daggett, ten miles distant. He was still up to his eyes in work and now he was short-handed, but he was taking time to lodge a complaint against Roy Bidwell for horse stealing. He knew that it would mean war with the Bidwells, but it would have to come anyway, and he was no hand to procrastinate.

He had his interview with the county attorney and the Sheriff, and attended to some other business before he remembered that he had neglected to eat breakfast that morning. Passing the door of the only decent restaurant in town reminded him and he turned in.

A waitress in a smart blue linen uniform slipped a menu card on his table with a pleasant "Good morning."

Boyce looked up and his lips parted in a smile. He had never been any great hand with the ladies, and the girl's friendly greeting won him instantly. Her face was not exactly pretty, the cheek bones being a little too high for regularity, but somehow it seemed to be the sort of face Ed Boyce had been looking for for years. And the eyes, a blend of blue and gray, sent a galvanic thrill straight to his heart. She was strongly yet slenderly built, and the dash of cosmetics though giving her a piquant look, could not altogether conceal what Ed knew was a healthy tan of the outdoors.

In an instant, however, Boyce was coolly reserved. He had met friendly waitresses before. This girl stood calmly awaiting his order and, stealing a second glance, Boyce realized that she was not of the usual type at all.

"Been working here long?" he queried when she returned with his breakfast.

"Only two or three months," she returned with a smile, "but I won't spill coffee down your neck."

"I'm not afraid of that, but I wish you wouldn't stand behind me at all," he said.

"Why?"

"Because," he answered boldly, "I like to have you stand where I can watch you."

The girl flushed, and Boyce feared he had offended her. His smile was guileless, however, and she laughed. "I suppose you would feel safer," she said.

"On the contrary, I feel in more danger when I'm lookin' at you than I ever did in my life."

The girl's eyes seemed to ask a question as to his sincerity as they met his for just a moment, and then she hurried off to wait upon another belated customer.

As Boyce watched the girl's swift, graceful movements, he was stirred by emotions entirely new to him. "That girl doesn't belong here slinging hash in a small-town restaurant," he soliloquized. "I'm going to see a lot more of her. When Ellen gets here I'm going to have her get this girl out on the ranch for a while. Wonder what her name is—but there's plenty of time to find that out."

As he went to pay his check, his eyes again met the girl's, and a wave of warm color flooded her cheeks as she turned quickly away, but he felt that she was not displeased.

He determined that he would be sure to eat in this restaurant whenever he came to town, and he meant that to be often. Nevertheless, his next glimpse of the girl was not to be in the restaurant but in his own dooryard.

It was the next day and he was working on his books when Hung Fat padded into the room which served as office.

"Young gal say mus' see boss man—tell Hung Fat gloo to hell."

The next moment the Chinaman was brushed aside and, to Boyce's amazement, the girl of the restaurant stood in the room. Now, however, there was no smile upon her face, and her expression was anything but pleasant. For one moment she appeared to be as surprised as he, and then she stepped in front of him with an air of uncompromising hostility.

"Are you the boss of this ranch?" she demanded.

"Why, yes, Miss—won't you be seated?"

"No. All I want is to tell you that if you think you can send my brother to the penitentiary you're mistaken," the girl flamed.

"Your brother? Do you mean—are you—" he stammered.

"Yes, I am. I'm Ina Bidwell, and Roy Bidwell is my brother. And you're not going to railroad him to the penitentiary," she declared hotly.

Something seemed to go dead inside Ed Boyce. This girl had stirred him at first sight as no other woman ever had done. And, being a man given to daydreams, as lonely men frequently are, he had built up more of a romance around this slim girl than he realized until he saw it dashed in pieces before his eyes.

II

KING COLE AND BABE

Boyce had arisen at the girl's entrance, and by successive steps his features changed from smiling friendliness to grim determination. No matter what thoughts he had entertained concerning this girl, she could not sway him into relenting with a lawbreaker. Nor was it solely because her brother had tried to steal horses which belonged to him. He would have been just as unrelenting had the Percheron colts belonged to another.

"You'd better sit down," he said. "Maybe we can talk this thing out. I'm sorry if it's your brother who got caught, but there's nothin' to this railroadin' talk. I caught him red-handed, and if he will steal horses, he'll have to pay the penalty."

"It's a lie," the girl said flatly. "Roy never stole a thing in his life. You're just having him arrested to show how smart you are. Get a name for yourself. Have people say how quick you do things."

Her breast heaved with emotion, but Boyce was getting too angry to make allowances. The things of which she had accused him hurt.

"You know better than that," he charged. "I think you know that your brother is guilty. You're lucky that I didn't have the other two arrested. I'm sure they're just as guilty as the one I caught."

"Maybe they did steal your old colts, but Roy never. You never saw him with those colts. He didn't know anything about them—he told me so himself."

"Well, from what I've heard, the word of a Bidwell wouldn't go far in this country," he retorted.

For an instant an expression of pain, almost, he thought, of humiliation, crossed the girl's face. He regretted that last remark, but biting her lip as though to spur herself to another outburst, the girl answered furiously:

"Maybe it wouldn't, but we never framed anybody up just to get a big name for ourselves."

With a great effort, Boyce controlled his none too saintly temper. "See here, Miss, if you come here to plead for your brother, you ain't doin' him or yourself any good by abusin' me. I know he stole the colts. If you know any reason why I should be easy on him, I'm listenin'."

"He didn't steal your colts," the girl insisted. "You told the Sheriff you found 'em in a corral, an' that you saw Roy riding away from there. He's been out looking for work horses, but he hadn't been near that corral."

"Well, a jury'll have to decide on that, but there's no doubt in my mind of his guilt, an' I'm goin' to do my best to make an example of him. The stealin' that's been carried on around here has got to stop."

"I tell you, Roy isn't a thief," the girl cried. "He's always been honest—he never had gone in with the other boys in their crooked work"—she seemed not to realize the damaging admission she had just made. "He wants to go to school and amount to something, and now you'll ruin his whole life just because you're a big-headed fool who won't listen to anybody."

Again Boyce had been about to relent; or at least to ask the girl more about her brother, but her last sentence had exploded his temper. He didn't mind being called a fool, but he did resent the accusation of bigotry. The one thing he could never tolerate was conceit, and he prided himself upon being just what he pretended to be and no more.

"All right, if that's the way you feel about it, there's no more to be said. Your brother will go to the pen if I can send him there, and I hope he gets a good long term." Too furious to trust himself further, he sat down at his desk and began to fumble among his papers. For a minute the girl stood regarding him with eyes smoldering with hate.

"Oh—oh—damn you," she hissed, and rushed outside.

For a moment Boyce sat there, gazing at the door, and then he walked to the window and watched the girl swing onto her horse with the light grace of a real horsewoman. She was riding the same calico horse which he had seen twice before with Roy Bidwell upon it.

But he could not see the scalding tears that were blinding the girl's eyes.

For a long time, Boyce sat there at his desk, but the figures on the papers in front of him were but a blur. Gradually the hot anger which had mastered him passed away. The vision of the Bidwell girl as he had first seen her there in the café protruded itself. Surely there had been something fine about her. Boyce called himself a good judge of men but he had had little experience with women. Nevertheless, he had to admit that there had been something admirable in her defense of her worthless family. It had been loyalty, and that was a trait which he could appreciate. Notwithstanding this, he could not conquer his belief that her brother should be punished. He was a just man, without either vindictiveness or weakness, and he could not condone crime.

Eventually, he decided that he would make a more thorough investigation of the Bidwells. Roy, he knew, was much younger than Hank or Quall, being, indeed, little more than a boy, though already he had heard tales of the youth's prowess as a bronco fighter. If Roy had only been misled by his older brothers, and there was a chance for his redemption, he would not press the charge against him. The few weeks he would have to spend in jail might be ample punishment, and really give him a start on the right path.

Having made this decision, Boyce felt better about it. The next time he saw the girl he would have a calmer talk with her, and make her see his side of the question. And immediately he found himself wanting to go right down to Daggett to see her. The matter itself was not pressing, and he recognized with a feeling of irritation that it was because he wanted to see the girl. It was foolishness because after the stormy scene they had just had, there could never be anything between them.

He was expecting his sister Ellen in a couple of weeks, but now something prompted him to write her a letter, urging that she come on at once. Though he did not frame it so in his own mind, he felt the need of feminine defense against the impression which Ina Bidwell had made upon him.

While he was about it, he wrote another letter to his Uncle Tom, requesting that if he could spare them at all he allow two of his punchers to come on and work on the Clawhammer until other men could be secured. The men he asked were Dan and Don Dixon, twins whom Ed knew were absolutely reliable. One or both of them were sure to be a great help.

Boyce had little faith in any of the three men working for him. Parmer might be all right but he looked shifty. The other two were indubitably colleagues of the Bidwell boys, and one of them, George Weeks, Boyce had learned, was related to Brig Highhouse, the former foreman of the Clawhammer. Just as soon as possible, he meant to get a new crew.

When Boyce arose the next morning, it was with the intention of driving down to Daggett that day and having lunch in the café where the Bidwell girl worked. She would not make a scene there, he thought, and he could talk to her quietly about her brother, and convince her that he meant only to be just, and that if there was a chance of making something out of this younger brother of hers that he would be glad to coöperate.

He pulled on his clothes and went to the window where he could see the colt pasture. The frisky Percherons were all in sight, and he heaved a sigh of relief. They were mighty fine colts, and the main reason was their sire, a magnificent twenty-one-hundred pound black stallion named King Cole, which had cost Boyce a cool five thousand dollars, and the former owners of the Clawhammer a good bit more. Boyce walked out to the stable where the stallion was kept, for he had assumed the care of that horse himself. Always before the splendid creature had rushed up to the manger of his box stall to greet the man, but this morning he did not come. Boyce could see him lying down across one corner of the stall and the posture seemed a bit unnatural.

"Hey! King! Come alive there," he shouted, but the horse did not move.

As soon as Boyce opened the door, he knew the stallion was dead, but a harsh, bitter oath rasped from his throat as he saw the pool of blood in which the noble head lay. King Cole's throat had been slashed from ear to ear.

It was nothing but an act of vicious vandalism; but not wanton cruelty alone was responsible for the crime, Boyce knew. It was an attempt to get revenge upon him, and his mind instantly fastened the blame upon the Bidwell tribe. Their motive might have been revenge for the arrest of Roy Bidwell, or because of the discharge of the other two brothers, or possibly both together. Anyway, he was sure that nobody else had any motive for such an act.

It was a real loss and one which Boyce could ill afford to stand. For some reason the former owners had allowed the insurance on the animal to lapse, and Boyce had not yet got around to having it renewed. There would not be one cent of compensation.

All thought of a reconciliation with the girl was now driven from his mind. The one thing he wanted was to lay his hands upon the men who had committed this deed. Nor was it the money loss alone which influenced him. It was no less than sacrilegious to take the life of such a wonderful, beautiful bit of nature.

Boyce summoned his men, and watched them closely while they inspected the dead horse. Jack Parmer was voluble in his expressions of amazement and resentment; the other two glumly taciturn. Once, however, Boyce saw the eyes of the two men meet, and it seemed to him that there was a flash of malignant satisfaction exchanged.

Getting the dead horse out through the door was considerable of a problem. After it was accomplished, Boyce gave orders for the stallion to be dragged away and deeply buried. Then he saddled a horse and rode away without leaving a hint as to his destination.

He was headed for the Bidwell domicile on Grizzly Creek.

One glance at the run-down ranch was enough to index the character of the owners. Everywhere shone the evidence of shiftlessness. The hay meadows were burned and yellow from lack of water, though the creek ran a full stream. The fences were all cobbled up with every sort of material; even the corrals were makeshift; broken pieces of machinery lay about everywhere; the roofs of the stables and the house sagged, and even the dooryard was cluttered with litter.

It seemed utterly incongruous that a clean-looking girl like the Ina Bidwell Boyce had seen in the Daggett café could have come from such surroundings as these. But it was the male members of the family Boyce was looking for now. He only hoped that the girl would not be present.

As Boyce approached, he looked keenly about for evidence that Hank and Quall were home but he saw none. There were no horses in the corral; no saddles strewn about. Nevertheless, he didn't intend to leave without a warning. They had told him in Daggett that old Luther Bidwell was no good, and the looks of his place proved it. Boyce felt that the old man must be cognizant of the actions of his sons, and if he wasn't he should be.

There was no fence in front of the house, so Boyce rode up within two rods of the door, and was about to shout when a large, fat, flabby woman with straggly hair down over her eyes came to the door to scrape garbage from a plate. She saw Boyce but, ignoring him, she waddled out about ten feet and began to call chickens. The fowls, two dozen strong, came clacking all around her enormous feet. Those feet, Boyce saw, were clad in tattered carpet slippers, and loosely wrinkled cotton stockings flopped around her swollen calves.

"Good God!" Boyce articulated faintly. "Can that be the mother of such a girl?"

Her poultry feeding completed, the woman turned watery eyes upon Boyce. "Yuh wanta see my man?" she asked dully.

"Yes."

"Git off 'n' go in," the woman directed, and waddled back into the house. Reluctantly Boyce followed her to the door.

The room he saw was disordered and dirty, and back in one corner he saw a man reared back against the wall with his feet on a table. The man held a pipe in one hand and a newspaper in the other. He had a long, gaunt frame which he disdained to move at the entrance of a stranger. Tobacco juice streaked his matted gray whiskers.

"Come in, stranger," he invited indolently.

"If you don't mind, I'd rather talk to you out here," Boyce said crisply.

"Oh, never mind the old woman. Outside, there's no place tuh set."

"My business won't take long—it won't require a sitting. Come on out," Boyce snapped.

With a lugubrious sigh, old Luther Bidwell heaved his lean frame upright and walked slowly outside. Boyce withdrew from the door a few paces.

"Say, are you the new foreman over t' the Clawhammer, the one who had my boy arrested?" Bidwell demanded, with a little more show of interest.

"The same," Boyce shot back. "I also fired your other two sons, and this morning I found my Percheron stallion in the stall with his throat cut. I'm a man of few words, but I think your boys are responsible for that. I've come here to warn you to lay off the Clawhammer an' have them do it unless you want the whole bunch inside the penitentiary or worse. The first time I catch any of your outfit trespassing on the Clawhammer ranch, they're liable to stop a bullet."

Old Bidwell flared up indignantly. "Say, look here, feller, I don't stand fer no man comin' onto my own place an' threatenin' me. As fer my boys, Roy is innercent, an' the others kin take keer o' themselves. You monkey with them an' yuh'll find yoreself hung on the hot end of a bullet."

"You've had your warning; now heed it," Boyce said. "I don't intend to stand any foolishness whatever from you people."

"What you need," the old man hissed, "is a damn good lickin'. Jump him, Babe!"

Boyce started to turn around, but before he could move a ponderous body had landed upon his back. A powerful pair of hands closed under his chin and he was jerked over backward. In falling, Boyce had landed on top of his assailant, but it did him little good as he was on his back with his head pressed against the other's stomach. All he could see was a mighty pair of legs which came up and fastened around his middle with an excruciating scissors. At the same time his foe clamped one hand under his chin and dealt Boyce a volley of club-like blows with the side of the other fist, not hard enough to do real damage, yet annoyingly painful.

The real pain came from the leg hold which seemed to be fairly cutting him in two. Boyce had never dreamed that there could be so much strength in a pair of human legs. But before he could free himself from this hold, he had to break the other one. He reached up and caught the arm that was holding his head and jerked desperately, without, however, interfering with the rain of blows upon his face which had already brought the blood from his nose in streams and which was running into his mouth and strangling him. Once he jerked the arm loose, but before he could raise his head the arm was wrenched away from him and again his head was hugged close to the brawny body of his foe. For a moment then the pain from his adversary's clamped legs was paralyzing, and Boyce could do nothing but lie still and try to bear it.

He wouldn't beg for mercy if he was killed, and he wondered if this would be the outcome. Those steady, chopping blows continued but they rather served to divert his mind from the greater torture. And then, just when he was beginning to despair, he felt the grip of the tree-like legs relaxing. The fellow had applied all the pressure he could, and now his legs were tiring a bit.

With a sudden swift movement Boyce again caught the arm with both hands and tore it away from his face. At the same time he gave a convulsive wriggle that carried him downward until only his head was caught between the vise-like legs. Right there the legs tightened up, and among other agonies Boyce knew the one of suffocation. He struggled madly but without relieving himself a bit. Then again reason asserted itself and he remained quiet, silently bearing the torture until he felt those legs relax.

It came quickly. A cramped muscle caused his antagonist to loosen his hold for an instant and, throwing his legs high in the air, Boyce gave a body jerk and squeezed himself out.

More through instinct than anything else, Boyce got to his feet, though he was dizzy headed and staggered like a drunken man. It took longer for his more cumbersome foe to get to his feet, but Boyce saw only a vague blur which he realized was his foe coming in again.

"Go after him, Babe, beat him up plenty," he heard a voice which he recognized as old man Bidwell's say.

Boyce couldn't run, but the primitive instinct of self-defense caused him to strike out rapidly, if blindly, with a series of pawing blows which momentarily disconcerted his foe. Before the fellow could close in again and clinch, the fog faded from before Boyce's eyes and he could see clearly.

Boyce was amazed at the kind of foe he had to face. It was a creature of great size, and he had had ample evidence of great strength. But the face was a great, blank blob that registered almost complete vacuity of expression. For all that he weighed well over two hundred pounds, he could not have been over eighteen or nineteen years of age. The huge, vacant face was covered with a thick down which had never known a razor.

Boyce's hand had instinctively gone to the handle of his gun, and he had intended to shoot in defense of his life, but his hand came away when he realized the character of his assailant. His blows changed to straight-arm punches which kept his unskilled foe away, but he did not even put into them all the power that he could. He had no wish to harm a person whose mind, he could see at a glance, was not quite right.

"Call him off, Bidwell," he panted through his bloody lips. "I don't want tuh hurt him."

"Air ye licked?" Bidwell cackled.

"Call him off, I tell you, or I'll use my gun and it won't be on him," Boyce called. He was having his hands full holding the powerful youth away, and he knew that he must do that or use his gun. If Young Bidwell ever got his clutches on him again, he knew he would be finished.

"Le's see yuh use yore gun," Bidwell jeered.

The lumbering slob of a woman had come to the door. Busy as he was, Boyce could see the remarkable resemblance between her and his opponent, both in face and figure.

"Luther Bid'll, you stop that fight before Babe gits hurt," she screeched. When her husband only laughed, she lumbered out into the yard and seized a club. "If you hurt Babe, I'll brain you," she said to Boyce.

"It's what I'm tryin' not tuh do," Boyce retorted, breathing hard.

"Babe! You, Babe, you stop that," the woman ordered, and to Ed Boyce's vast relief her ponderous son paused to look at her wonderingly. Boyce took advantage of it to back hastily toward his horse. If things started again, he meant to curb them instanter with his gun. Babe, however, yielded easily to his mother's persuasions and went with her into the house.

"Got a warmer reception than yuh was lookin fer, didn't yuh?" Bidwell guffawed.

Boyce was resentfully aware that he had gotten by far the worst of it at the hands of the boy whom he now knew was little better than an imbecile, but who made up in physique what he lacked in mentality. His nose was still bleeding, and he could feel it swelling beneath the eyes, and some of his front teeth were loose. His sides felt like they had been beaten with a club.

"You're not much of a man, Bidwell, to have a half-wit fight your battles for you, but I don't think he'll ever surprise me again. In fact, if you think much of any of your precious sons, you'll keep them out of my path. I'm no blowhard; I'm simply stating a cold fact," he said evenly, and, swinging aboard his horse, he turned and rode away.

He soon forgot about the fight; that had been merely an incidental matter. However, he recognized the fact that it might encourage the Bidwells to continue their depredations until a genuine clash became inevitable. It rather humiliated him to think that such people should imagine themselves equal to the task of outwitting or whipping him. He had his vanity.

This soon passed from his mind also as another thought intruded. It had been hard to reconcile the relationship of Ina Bidwell with her horse thief brothers, but it was far harder to reconcile her belonging to the same family as those he had seen that morning. He could catalog old Bidwell at once—no conscientious scruples, but too lazy to be really dangerous. But that fat, sloppy woman—if that was Ina's mother, certainly the girl was to be pitied. And what a place for a girl, for any girl to be raised! He found himself feeling glad that she had got away from there, even if it was only to sling hash in a cheap café.

He went home and cleaned up, being thankful that there was nobody around the place to see him but Hung Fat. But later in the day, for no good reason at all, he got out his car and headed for Daggett.

"I won't be home for supper," he told Hung Fat.

III

A LOST JOB

Ina Bidwell left the Clawhammer ranch with her eyes full of blinding tears of defeat and fury. She had failed utterly in her mission, which was to convince the new foreman that Roy was not a thief.

As soon as she was away, she regretted that she had not begun the interview as she had intended. She had meant to make her approach humbly, to show him gently why he had been mistaken. Just why she had flared up the instant she saw the man she didn't quite know. It had been a shock to find that he was the man who had made such an impression upon her in the restaurant. Why he had done this was another mystery, but she had been unable to get him out of her mind all day, and her thoughts had been strangely pleasant. It amounted almost to a personal affront to find him the man who was prosecuting her brother, and she had blurted out her angry resentment upon the impulse of the moment.

Later, as she had time to think it over, she saw her mistake. She even arrived at a stage where she could see a speck of justification for Boyce's acts. Doubtless, he did believe Roy was guilty, and doubtless it seemed right to him that the boy should be punished.

But Roy was not guilty. She would have refused to believe a confession from his own lips. The moment she had learned he was in jail she had gone to see him, and he had assured her on his word of honor that he had not taken the Clawhammer colts. In all his life Roy had never lied to her, and never had he been a thief.

If either of her other brothers had been accused she would not have doubted their guilt, but Roy, her only full brother, was different. Hank and Quall were much older than she, and she had heard practically nothing concerning their mother. So far as that was concerned, she had heard little enough about her own mother. She did know that her mother had been a school-teacher, and after she was old enough to read she had found some of her mother's old books and papers, and these were her most precious possessions. Long before that time her father had married the slatternly woman who was the mother of half-witted Babe, and Ina herself was but little more than a slave to do the woman's bidding.

Always she and Roy had been close together. Instinctively, they knew that they were different from the people around them, and though it had been a hard fight for two children they had kept themselves clean, and had never followed in the degenerate footsteps of the others. Ina had sensed that it was her influence which had kept Roy straight, for sometimes there had been hard fights to keep him from following the same course as his brothers. For one thing, they were all expert horsemen; in fact would not demean themselves by doing any kind of work that could not be accomplished from the back of a horse. Good as Hank and Quall were, Roy quickly excelled them, and by the time he was eighteen, he was known as the best rider in the Daggett country.

It was about this time that Hank and Quall began to take a pronounced interest in Roy, and Ina sensed that it was from no brotherly regard. They had heard of town rodeos where big purses were offered to successful competitors, and they saw where Roy, with his riding skill, could soon become their meal ticket. Roy loved horses, and the conflict of conquering a bucking bronco was stimulating to his soul. She saw then that she must do something drastic or lose him.

From the time she was old enough, Ina had gone to school whenever there was one available and when her stepmother would let her off from the housework. She had dragged Roy along with her, and both were quick to learn. Fired by stories of achievement she read and heard from her teachers, Ina had early conceived the idea of making a great man out of Roy. Finding him about to become a mere professional bronco twister, she had desperately appealed to him to agree to go away to school as soon as the two of them could get the money. Roy had finally agreed.

Getting the money was no easy task. It seemed that the only way for Roy to make any amount of money was by crooked means. Temptations were always being thrown in his way, but he had always resisted them. It was then, seeing that something more must be done, that Ina had left home and secured employment in the Daggett café. Both she and Roy had saved every cent, and finally it seemed that Roy could go away to school the next year.

And then had come his unjust arrest for horse stealing.

As soon as Ina had learned what Roy had been doing that morning, she donned her riding clothes, got Roy's pinto horse, Checkers, from the livery stable, and headed for the Clawhammer ranch. She realized that they had no proof of innocence beyond Roy's word, and she could not expect that to go far with the new foreman, but she did hope that when she explained Roy's and her own ambition, that the man would understand why Roy could not be fool enough to throw away all his chances by becoming a thief. As she rode away, she realized that she had scarcely spoken a word to the man concerning those ambitions. She had reviled him, and accused him of being big-headed. In her heart she knew this was untrue. He had had ample grounds for thinking Roy a thief, and now by her own display of temper she had forever alienated any chance of getting the sole witness against him to show mercy.

She told herself that she would see this man again, swallow her pride and go down on her knees if necessary to spare Roy, but some inner voice argued that she could never bring herself to do this. When the time came she would flare up again.

Could Roy be convicted after all, she asked herself. The evidence was circumstantial, and it would be this new foreman's word against Roy's. With a bitter sinking of the heart, she realized that the word of a Bidwell would not go far. Her father had always proved so untrustworthy that nobody would believe him on oath, and Hank and Quall had added to the general reputation for unreliability which the Bidwells had built up. She was too strong to indulge in self-pity, else she could have cried because she had been born a Bidwell.

Her mind was going round and round in circles and getting no place. She had to save Roy from the penitentiary, but there seemed no way. This man Boyce had proved adamant. She told herself she hated him, and yet he had won a measure of her respect. He had strength and he was a man with the courage to follow out his convictions. She felt that he would be a dangerous man to have for a foe, especially if one were a man.

It was inevitable that, in her groping for a way to save her brother, it should occur to her to wonder who the real thief might be. Instantly her mind flashed to Hank and Quall—and from them to the men whose tools she knew them to be, the Highhouses.

She had not lived in an environment where theft was thought to be clever without becoming familiar to some extent with what went on in the country. The systematic looting of the wealthy Clawhammer ranch had long been a standing joke with her father and brothers. Her father, she knew, received no part in it. For all she knew, he had never stolen a thing—mostly because he was too lazy. Hank and Quall had profited to some extent, but she knew that the men who had really fattened off the Clawhammer was old Brig Highhouse, for years the trusted manager of the outfit, and his horde of retainers. Of these latter Hank and Quall were two, but she knew that they were minor members. In the hill country back of Daggett lived a whole clan of Highhouses, of whom old Brig was the head, and these were the beneficiaries.

Unquestionably the discharge of old Brig had put an end to a soft proposition, for it had been easy for the old man to transfer the profits of the concern to his own pockets and let the owners take the loss, and have a deficit as well. He had resented his discharge bitterly, and Ina had heard Quall and Hank remark more than once that old Brig would see to it that his successor did not remain long.

Those colts had assuredly been stolen through Brig Highhouse's orders, and left in the Grizzly Creek corral until they could be driven to the hill country that night. How to prove it was still another matter. She hated a squealer, and besides she knew that if the truth came out Hank and Quall would be among the first victims. She had no love for them—they had always treated her badly—but some deep-seated instinct of loyalty made her reluctant to give them away.

Desperate as she was, it did not occur to her to go to Ed Boyce and tell him about the Highhouses. He would demand proof and she had none except her word, and she was too proud to ask him to take that after what had happened. Besides, she derived a devilish sort of satisfaction in knowing what he was up against, and knowing that he still had it to learn. Let him learn it by bitter experience, she mused.

With Roy in prison, it was hard to resume her monotonous business of waiting on tables. The sight of people constantly shoveling food into their mouths sickened her, but now that Roy was in trouble they needed money worse than ever. She went to see a lawyer, and parted with a slice of their savings as a retainer that made her fairly gasp. The lawyer listened to her story, talked with Roy, and informed them bluntly that Boyce hadn't enough evidence to convict if the case was handled right—if it was tried any place but in Daggett. There, however, the local prejudice against the Bidwells, would insure a conviction on any kind of flimsy evidence.

The attorney promised to make a fight for a change of venue but this entailed still more expense, and the girl foresaw the humiliation that would be hers and Roy's when the sordid affairs of the Bidwells were dragged out into open court. It was all grossly unfair, but she and Roy had not a single friend to whom they could appeal for aid.

"Keep your money, Sis, an' I'll plead guilty an' git it over with," Roy told her. "I happened tuh be in the neighborhood of that corral and no jury on earth will believe I didn't steal them colts an' shoot at Boyce when he found 'em."

"No; we'll fight it to the last gasp," she declared firmly. "I'm not going to have you branded as a thief. Do you suppose it was Hank or Quall?"

"Couldn't have been them put the colts in the corral, but likely they knew all about it," Roy said bitterly. "You know it would tickle 'em to death for me to git into trouble. They're sore because I wouldn't go in with 'em."

"I could kill them if I thought they had anything to do with putting you here."

"Better let 'em alone, Sis. They're damn mean."

"I bet I know who stole those colts," she exclaimed. "It was Ace Highhouse!"

Roy did not share her excitement. "Mebbe. It could a been him as well as anybody else, but how can we prove it?"

"I don't know."

The next night the girl's eyes narrowed as she saw Brig Highhouse and his son Ace saunter into the restaurant for supper. The former foreman of the Clawhammer was a man of average size with a dominating eye and pugnacious manner. He was dwarfed in his size by his son, and the latter was obviously proud of his build and strength. At first glance, Ace Highhouse seemed to be extraordinarily handsome, but a closer look would disclose a pair of selfish, arrogant eyes, and his whole expression was that of a man used to having his own way and bullying those about him.

Without removing their hats, the two men seated themselves at a table. "Hello there, Ina. Come over here an' feed us," Ace called across the room.

"I'll bring it to you, but you'll have to feed yourselves," the girl retorted, and raised a general laugh in which old Brig Highhouse alone did not join.

Ina deliberately stayed away from their table as long as possible, and old Brig was scowling blackly when she finally came to take their order.

"Say, yo're lookin' purty to-night," Ace remarked. "Must be happy workin' here."

"Happy?" she said in a low, vibrant tone. "Do you think I could be happy with my brother in jail for something somebody else did?"

"It's too bad he didn't git away with them colts," Ace said softly.

Ina's face flamed. "He didn't see those colts, an' you know it."

"Why, how should I know?" Ace queried innocently. "I thought he did."

Ina bit her lip to hold back the hot words which seethed to her tongue. "I'm waiting for your orders," she said coldly.

"Bring me ham an' aigs," Brig Highhouse ordered curtly. "An' when you see that brother of yours, you tell him I'll git him outa that scrape, but that if I do he's got tuh take his orders from me."

"I'd rather see him in jail," she retorted hotly.

"Aw, come on, Ina, the old man just wants tuh help yuh," Ace cajoled. Old Brig said nothing.

Just then Ina's eyes turned toward the door, and she caught her breath with a gasp as she saw Ed Boyce entering. Her eyes opened wider as she saw the condition of his face. For a fleeting second their glances met, and she thought there was a trace of a smile on his swollen lips. With a toss of her head she turned back to take Ace Highhouse's order.

A few minutes later she realized that, much as she might hate to do so, she would be obliged to take his order. She stood beside his table, but her piquant little nose was tilted toward the ceiling.

"Fine evenin', Miss Bidwell," Boyce greeted.

No answer.

"I'm sorry I got huffy yesterday when you came to the ranch," he said. She had no idea how much of a concession that was from him.

"I—I—wanted to have another talk with you about your brother," he went on. "Until that stallion was killed I was minded to be easy on him. But if your people are goin' to pursue such tactics as cuttin' the throats of valuable animals, I'm afraid I'll have to stick to my original intention."

At last Ina's clear eyes rested upon his face, and hey sparkled with disdain.

"Still havin' pipe dreams, are you?" she demanded. "I don't know anything about your stallion, and if his throat was cut my people didn't do it."

The blood was rising under the tan of his face, but he strove mightily to hold his temper in leash.

"I'm mighty sorry for you on account of your folks," he said. "I was over there this morning."

"Was that where you got that face?" she asked bitingly.

"It was," he gritted. "I was assaulted by your nit-wit brother. But I'm telling you this: if you people persist in fighting me, you'll git the worst of it."

"Well, it looks like my nit-wit brother, as you call him, was more than able to hold his own," she sneered. Both of them were now terribly angry, but their voices had not been raised enough for even those at the next table to hear what they said.

"At that, I think he must be the best one of your family," he retorted.

By this time Ina's rage was simply ungovernable. Unable to think of anything to say, and completely beside herself, she drew back and smacked his face with the palm of her hard little hand.

The blow stung and Boyce recoiled. He was not used to accepting blows of any kind without retaliation, and only by a mighty exertion of will was he able to keep his hands down. Then, slowly and deliberately, he got to his feet, got his hat, and started for the door.

The Greek proprietor came running. "Wait, Meester. You have been insult. I apologize—I beg de pardon. I fire dis girl quick. I do not permit my customers to be annoyed."

"Never mind. I'm leaving anyway," Boyce said.

The Greek still retained a hold upon his coat, but the fellow turned and shouted at the girl: "Take off de apron—geet your coat. You work for me no more."

"Aw, hell, Pappas, it wasn't the girl's fault. That guy got fresh with her," a husky teamster interferred. "I'd like tuh bust him one in the nose."

"Better keep out of this," Boyce said to the teamster grimly. "I'm not in the habit of getting fresh with girls."

"Well, I'm gettin' fresh with you," roared the gallant teamster and swung a mighty blow for Boyce's head. The next moment he was sprawled upon his back with a table and a lot of dishes on top of him. He had been knocked cold.

Boyce smiled grimly. He was glad the teamster had afforded him some outlet for his feelings, even though he had hit the man harder than he intended, and he knew that if their situations had been reversed he would probably have interfered as the unfortunate teamster had done.

A dozen other men in the place had been ready to gang up on Boyce had the teamster had any luck, but witnessing the driving power behind his fist they hesitated. Boyce shook the Greek loose and left the place.

Meantime, Ina shucked off the apron uniform which belonged to her employer and put on her coat. Her one thought was to get out of the place as quickly as possible. She had been the center of a disturbance, and though she was furiously angry with Boyce, her own cheeks blushed with shame. She had hated Pappas anyway and was glad enough to go.

Then she remembered that by losing her job she ended Roy's chance of going to school. In that country jobs for girls were not easily obtained. They might not even have money enough to pay their lawyer. She could not even afford to pay her board. That meant that she must, for Roy's sake, go back to the hated surroundings on Grizzly Creek.

The foreman of the Clawhammer had caused all this trouble. God, how she hated him!

As she hurried out, trying to pay no attention to the expressions of sympathy for her, and of indignation against the Greek, she passed the table occupied by the Highhouses. They had not moved.

"See yuh this evenin', Ina?" Ace asked, catching her hand. "We got somethin' important tuh tell yuh. Orta be willing tuh listen after this."

Ina jerked her hand free, but she paused to look for a moment into the hard faces of the Highhouses.

"If yuh wanta git even with that swellhead on the Clawhammer, this is yore chance," old Brig rumbled.

"All right," Ina said impulsively. "Come up to my room."

IV

CONSPIRACY

INA was not long getting control of her emotions, but a feeling of depression possessed her. No one knew just how hard she had struggled to lift Roy above the environment of the Bidwells, and almost in a breath it had all been swept away.

Her troubles had begun with the arrival of the new Clawhammer foreman, but her innate sense of justice and fair play made her realize that it had begun farther back than that. If the Highhouse gang had not looted the Clawhammer, Ed Boyce would not have come. They were to blame but it was Boyce against whom most of her anger was directed. He seemed to have a way of making her want to antagonize him at sight, and immediately things happened. Now he had caused her to lose her job, and if the Highhouses had any scheme to make him atone for that she was ready to listen. Moreover, she knew that Brig Highhouse was a powerful figure in the political life of the county, and if anybody could get Roy off he was the man. But if the price of Roy's freedom was his subservience to Highhouse, she preferred to have him in jail. She was not going to accept just any kind of terms the Highhouses might offer.

For some reason, old Brig had never liked her, but

Ace had been hanging around ever since she had been able to get good enough clothes to look like anything. Lately, he had courted her more insistently, and deep down in her heart she was afraid of him.

There was a knock on her door, and when she opened it Ace Highhouse stood grinning in the corridor.

"Where's your father?" she asked.

"Oh, he's down in the lobby. I didn't want him along."

"I did."

"Aw, now, I can talk business as well as he can, an' he don't like women." The fellow shouldered in and helped himself to a chair. Ina leaned against the foot of her iron bed and regarded him suspiciously.

"Mebbe yuh thought it was funny I didn't take a hand when that bird insulted you to-night," he began. "Fact is, I had hard work keepin' my hands off'n him, but it wouldn't do 'cause people would've thought we was sore about losin' the job out there to him. But some day I'll wring his neck. I'd like tuh know where he got that face he was carryin'."

"Babe gave it to him. He went over there an' jumped onto them and it looks like Babe beat him up."

Ace laughed. "Tuh tell the truth, Ina, Babe is the only man in this country I'm afraid of. Him not bein' quite right kinda gives me the chills when I think of him gettin' a hold of me."

"Babe is harmless if they leave him alone—and he's not the fool people think he is," Ina said warmly.

"Just what was the row between you an' this here Boyce?"

"It was about Roy."

"I thought so. Well, the only way tuh save Roy from the pen is tuh git rid of this bird before the trial comes off."

"Get rid of him?"

"I don't mean maybe. He thinks yore people have been stealin' from the Clawhammer for years, an' he's hell bent tuh clean 'em out. He'll do it if he ain't stopped—an' stopped hard."

"How do you mean?"

"Oh, I don't mean killin' him, if that's what yo're afraid of, unless he makes too much trouble. But my dad's gang can put him into a corner that he'll be dang glad tuh git out of at any price. Wouldn't mind that, would you?"

"No-o."

"You may have tuh help a little."

"I want to."

"Fine. Then there's just one more little thing we gotta have an understandin' about."

"And what is that?"

"You know I been stuck on you for a long time. Us Highhouses are marryin' people. I want me a wife, an' I want you."

Ina straightened a little, and the fingers which clutched the bars of the iron bed tightened. She had half expected something like this. She knew what it meant to become the wife of a Highhouse. She had seen their drab, intimidated women who lived only to minister to the wants of their lords and masters. A woman had as well be dead as married to one of them as far as her happiness was concerned.

"I'm sorry, Ace, but I don't want to marry you," she said.

"No? Well, ain't that too bad?" His hard eyes had narrowed, and his tone was threatening. "I got different idees on the subject, Ina. I mean tuh make ye marry me whether yuh want to or not. I'd ruther yuh come of yore own free will, but by Gawd, I'm aimin' tuh have yuh for my woman."

"You can git out of here if you're goin' to talk like that," she said steadily. "I'd rather be dead than marry a Highhouse."

The fellow got to his feet and laughed at her. "Got more spunk than the rest o' the Bidwells, ain't yuh? I like that. But I did have an idee yuh thought a lot o' yore brother Roy. Seems like I was mistaken."

"What do you mean, mistaken?"

"Why, I'm offerin' tuh keep him outa the pen, when the only way in Gawd's world it can be done is git rid o' this Boyce feller an' the Highhouses are the only people who can do it, but you refuse my help," he taunted.

"I—I—didn't refuse your help," she denied.

"Oh, yes, yuh did. Yuh don't think I'd be fool enough tuh give yuh any help unless yuh come my way. But there's something else yuh mebbe ain't thought of. There ain't a business man in Daggett who'd dare tuh keep on in business here if my ole man told him he'd better quit. Mebbe yuh don't know it, but most of 'em are payin' out money to him for protection from the Plummer's Hole gang. This Greek, Pappas, is one of 'em. If we tell him tuh give you yore job back you'll git it. But if we tell him not tuh give it back, you won't git a job with him, nor with anybody else. You kin either hook up with me or go back tuh live with yore stepma. Yuh'd like that, wouldn't you?"

The man had taken a step forward and his fingers closed about her wrist. "Come on, now gimme a kiss. You ain't in no position tuh row with the Highhouses."

Every word had beat upon the girl's brain like a blow from a hammer. The Highhouses and the Plummer's Hole bandits were allies, and they ruled the country through fear. But without their help Roy's life would be ruined. By sacrificing herself she could save him. And, after all, existence with the Highhouses could be no worse than living with her own folks.

Young Highhouse saw the hesitation in her eyes, and gloated over the victory which he felt was already won. He swung her into the hollow of his arm and pressed his lips to her mouth. The girl offered no resistance, but she was far from responding to his demonstration. She could have killed him with pleasure for the loathsome caress.

Her face was pale, but she was not losing her temper with Ace as she had done with Ed Boyce. Her sense of caution was alert. She had been beaten into making a bad bargain, but she determined that she would not be cheated in the price they had offered her.

"Not so fast, Ace," she panted. "Maybe I'll have to marry you to save Roy, but I'm goin' to be darn sure he is saved. There'll be no more of this sort of stuff till Roy walks out of jail." She freed herself, and crossed the room to her window.

"You'll marry me, then?" he asked eagerly.

"I suppose so."

"I want a plain, out-an'-out promise," he insisted.

"All right then, I'll marry you," she said. Her throat and lips were hot and dry. It was difficult to enunciate, but she managed to keep herself calm. "But there's one thing more: I don't want you interferin' with Pappas about me, one way or another."

"I can make him hire you again, an' raise yore wages."

"I won't have it. But I want to know how you are going to make Boyce quit his job."

"That'll be easy. Things'll begin tuh happen tuh that feller that'll make his head swim. An' if that don't scare him out he'll find himself short about all the stock on his range," Ace laughed easily.

With a flash of intuition, Ina knew that Ed Boyce was not going to be defeated as easily as Ace Highhouse thought he was. And this gave rise to yet another thought.

"Look here, Ace," she said excitedly, "I'll not stand for murder. I'd rather Roy was convicted than have that man murdered."

"It's not your worry. He'll be damn glad tuh git out with a whole skin. But if he has tuh be bumped off, don't let yore conscience bother yuh, because he'd git it anyway sooner or later."

Ina felt that she had been tricked into making a sordid bargain. Of course, the Highhouses would eliminate Boyce anyway, regardless of any bargain they might make with her. She had just given herself to get them to do what they would have done anyway. But they could, and probably would, have waited until after Roy's trial before moving. She had never liked the Highhouses, but now she hated them.

"It is my concern," she said, rigidly controlling her emotions. "If that man is killed I'll never marry you."

"My Gawd, you ain't in love with him, are you?" Ace blurted.

"I hate him."

"Then—then——"

"I've told you. If he's murdered, I'm through with you."

"Damned if wimmin ain't peculiar," Ace snorted. "It's all right now, but when we're married I'll rule the roost, an' don't you forgit it." He turned on his heel and left the room.

Ina threw herself on the bed, but the sobs which any ordinary girl would have indulged in did not come. The brutality she had endured as a child had bred a stoicism which did not weaken now when it seemed that she had deliberately blasted her whole life. It would have been easier for her if she could have found relief in tears. It was far into the night when she arose, and she was half frozen.

What was she going to do now? She could not bring herself to beg Pappas for her job back, but the thought of remaining idle waiting for the Highhouse clan to run Ed Boyce out of the country was intolerable.

She was beginning to see, also, that it was a dirty deal Ed Boyce was getting. After all, he had done nothing except try to protect the interests in his charge. If he thought Roy had stolen the colts, he was duty bound to prosecute him. And he had been further aggravated by the real thief having tried to murder him. Then her mood hardened. Why hadn't he tried to find out something about Roy before branding him as a thief?

In the morning she went to Pappas restaurant to get her breakfast. Daggett was small and this was the only eating place in town except a tough joint at the lower end of town which no respectable woman could enter. The Greek had not yet found a girl to take her place, and was waiting on table himself. She knew him to be a very stubborn fellow, and she did not expect to have her job offered to her again.

"What's the mat—why you no come earlier?" Pappas demanded.

"Why should I?" she returned calmly. "Fired me, didn't you?"

"Yes. But dese man whose face you slap he come back later an' beg me geeve you back your job. So I geeve you one more trial."

"To hell with him—and you too," the girl flashed hotly. She had come into the restaurant vaguely hoping that the Greek would offer to take her back, and when he had she had rejected it simply because his action had been prompted by Ed Boyce. She knew she had been foolish, but having made her bed she determined to lie in it.

It made the Greek furious to have to wait on her, but she took a table and stayed there till he did it. After eating her breakfast she went to the livery stable to get Roy's calico horse. The town had become obnoxious to her, and she wanted to get out in the open spaces on the back of a horse. She did not even feel like going to see Roy before she left town.

She knew she would have to go to her father's cabin, because she had no place else to go, but she wanted to delay the disagreeable moment as long as possible. Checkers was feeling good, so instead of heading toward Grizzly Creek, she turned the other way.

Some time in the morning when the sun was getting hot she found a clear, cold spring and dismounted to rest. She was in the Highhouse hills, but a considerable distance from that part of the region inhabited by the Highhouse clan. It was a cool, inviting place, and she had slept scarcely at all the preceding night. She knew Checkers would not stray far away with the reins dragging, so letting him go to nibble the grass if he wanted to, she found a shady spot where the grass was long and soft and stretched out luxuriously. Before she realized it she was fast asleep.

She was awakened several hours later by the sound of voices at the spring where she had drunk. Fortunately, there had been no grass right there and she had been obliged to go around some bushes to find the place she wanted. Now they sheltered her from the men she could hear talking. Apparently, they had not run across Checkers, for they were talking with the utmost freedom.

"This is danged good water. Let's set down an' have a smoke, an' tank up again before we go," a man said. She recognized the voice instantly as that of Skelly, one of the riders for the Clawhammer. The fellow had frequently hung around her father's place, and had at times been inclined to be sweet on her.

He was a chum of Hank and Quall's, and supposed to be quite a dare-devil.

"Yo're always ready for a set-down an' a smoke, Skelly," declared a man whose voice she did not recognize.

"Yuh sure, are yuh, Skelly, that Boyce intends tuh fire you an' George Weeks?" demanded a third man. Instantly Ina was wide awake and upon her knees. She knew this voice well enough. It was Brig Highhouse himself. Peering through the bushes she saw that the stranger was a stern, middle-aged man whom both Skelly and Brig Highhouse treated with the utmost deference.

"I know damn well he is. He don't trust us with nothin'. He fired the Bidwells, an' he wouldn't have let 'em go unless he knew he could get men tuh take their places. An' if he can git men tuh take their places he can ours."

"Seems likely," admitted Brig. "What about Parmer?"

"I don't think he'll let him go till he's got somethin' on him."

"At that I'm none too sure o' Parmer," Brig said. "He's all right when there's somebody with him, but don't trust him too much when he's alone. He might blab."

"Well, git busy and go after that fellow while there is some of our men there," the stranger ordered curtly.

"We're goin' to," Brig said. "I got it all figgered out. We'll trick him into an old cabin up here above our place an' hold him there for a couple of months while the Clawhammer goes tuh wrack an' ruin. Won't hurt tuh run off a few hundred head o' stock either, an' them Percheron colts——"

"Before somebody else tries tuh git 'em again," Skelly grinned.

The older men frowned, and Brig went on. "The main thing is tuh have the banker an' a few other business men in Daggett sendin' the owner reports of how things are goin', an' we'll make 'em think if it wasn't for me there wouldn't be anything left."

"Of course, we've got to git you back runnin' the Clawhammer," the stranger admitted, a bit grudgingly it seemed to the girl. "If anybody else was runnin' the Clawhammer, they could plug up Mormon Gap, an' that'd make Plummer's Hole plumb unsafe—just like puttin' a cork in a bottle. But how yuh goin' to get him into that said cabin?"

"Easy," Brig said. "To-night Skelly can tell him that he seen the Bidwells sulkin' around this end of the range, an' that'll fetch him out here to-morrow. While that's carryin' on, I'll have Ock an' his boys plant some poisoned oats where they'll be sure tuh kill a few cattle. Boyce'll find 'em, an' all Skelly'll need do will be to tell him where the Bidwells are hidin'. He'll come a boilin'—an' we'll have a reception committee waitin' for him."

"But after it's all over—then what?" Skelly demanded.

"We'll fix it so that bird won't dare make a holler, or else he'll be past hollerin'," Brig Highhouse said grimly.

"Sounds all right, but supposin' he's already sent for some men, an' they show up?" Skelly inquired.

"Just tell 'em Boyce is away till we can handle 'em. If they git obstreperous we can knock 'em off."

"You're a purty clever schemer, Brig," Skelly laughed.

Ina heard the men get up and mount their horses. She waited in an agony of suspense lest they see Checkers. She didn't see how the pinto could possibly escape their vision, and if they found him they would find her. They would certainly be furious when they learned she had been eavesdropping, and there was no telling what they might do.

The next ten minutes were like a century. Something in the brush moved and the girl almost jumped out of her skin. The next moment Checkers poked his nose inquisitively around a bush.

With a gasp of relief, Ina sprang to the pinto's side and hopped into the saddle. If they did see her now, there was no horse in the country fast enough to overtake Checkers.

All through the interview which she had overheard, the girl's thoughts had been chaotic. Her most vivid impression was that she was listening to a criminal conspiracy which must be nullified. But as she began to think more coolly she wondered. Was it not exactly what she had bargained to have the Highhouses do—this luring Boyce away from the ranch and holding him a prisoner until after Roy's case was called for trial? True, she had not bargained to become a party to any theft, but she suddenly realized that if she objected to this part of the procedure, she would have to object to it all. Either she must go to Ed Boyce and tell him of the conspiracy against him, or else keep silent and let the thing go through. If she told Boyce, she argued bitterly, he would probably insist that Roy was guilty because she would have to admit that Hank and Quall were. And more than likely he would get himself killed.

It was a brain-wracking problem, and as yet she could find no answer.

V

TRICKED!

Ed Boyce told himself that he was through being foolish. He acknowledged that he had gone to Daggett for no other reason than to see Ina Bidwell, yet every time they met there was a row. He was through.

Having his face slapped was an entirely new experience for him, and he had been so utterly furious because he could not retaliate that he almost choked. Getting a crack at the interfering teamster had afforded some relief, and he had cooled off soon after leaving the restaurant. His instinctive sense of justice told him that he was the cause of the girl losing her job, and it was unfair to her. When he knew that she had left the place, he had returned and pleaded with the Greek to take her back. And that, he told himself, finished him with Ina Bidwell.

That the girl's relatives would continue their reprisals for the arrest of young Roy he was quite certain. His interview with the old man and the subsequent fight with the huge Babe had certainly terminated unsatisfactorily to himself, and they would be emboldened to attempt further acts.

He was therefore ready to lend a credulous ear when the man Skelly volunteered the information that he had seen the two discharged Bidwells sulking upon the Clawhammer range where they had no right to be.

"What could they be doing there?" he queried.

"Search me. When they saw me, they spurred their horses an' rode like hell," Skelly said.

"Haven't you been on good terms with them?"

"Why, shore. We've all worked here a long time, an' never had no trouble with 'em—much. Hank used tuh have a habit o' sneakin' the rest of our things till we caught him at it, an' let him savvy he'd git a bullet in the guts if he didn't lay off. Quall is a kind of a bully, too, till yuh show him where tuh head in. Both me an' Weeks had tuh call him good an' hard, but after that we got along all right," Skelly informed.

Boyce was inclined to doubt the sincerity of the man, but the story coincided with his own impression of the Bidwell boys. Without questioning Skelly further, except to ascertain the location of the place where they had been seen, he determined to investigate the next day and see what they had been up to.

Until he knew better where he stood, he intended to ride alone. He saw Skelly hanging around the next morning like he wanted to be invited along, but Boyce curtly ordered him to ride elsewhere.

"Goin' tuh see what the Bidwells have been up to?" Skelly could not help asking.

"I may get around that way," Boyce answered noncommittally.

Nevertheless, before noon he had reached the place where the Bidwell brothers had been seen. Skelly had stated that they had ridden out from a certain grove of aspen trees, and turned sharply to the right when they saw him. He located the grove, rode through it and overlooked a little grassy park. His eyes clouded somberly as he saw the bloated carcasses of a half a dozen cattle dotting the green meadow.

He knew at a glance that they had been poisoned. And at this season of the year the usual wild poisons were seldom found. He dismounted and looked the animals over closely, and then he walked all around the little meadow. Near the upper end he came upon a little square of scattered oats that had once been in a pile. Gathering up a handful he found them sticky with a syrupy mixture which had been used to make the strychnine adhere. They were the kind used in the poisoning of ground squirrels, but he knew they could not have been left here by accident.

This sort of thing had to be stopped. If the Bidwells kept on cutting the throats of valuable horses, and poisoning cattle, the outfit would soon be broke. He carefully gathered up as many of the poisoned oats as he could and tied them in a handkerchief for evidence against the Bidwells if the thing ever came to trial.

One result of his findings was that he gave to Skelly a measure of trust which he had not given before.

"Are you sure it was the Bidwells you saw to-day?" he asked the man upon his return.

"Sure I'm sure."

"Then I guess we've got a case against them," Boyce said grimly, displaying the oats, and telling what he had found. "I'll take these down to the Sheriff to-morrow."

"Tuh the Sheriff?" Skelly's jaw dropped.

"Certainly. They belong in jail with their brother."

"Well, yo're the doc. But if it was me—" Skelly was stalling for time to think.

"What would you do?"

"Well, it looks like purty weak evidence tuh me. O' course I was shore in my mind that it was them, but if I had tuh swear on the witness stand an' tell jest how I knowed it was them, the lawyers might git me all balled up. Besides, even if we knew they was in the vicinity, we couldn't prove it was them who planted the oats. Nobody saw 'em."

Boyce believed that the fellow was simply unwilling to face a barrage of questions from a lawyer—he knew how most unlettered men dread cross-examination—but he also realized that there was considerable truth in the man's diagnosis. The evidence was hardly strong enough to secure a conviction. His case was none too good against Roy Bidwell, and if he failed to get any of them convicted, they would certainly be emboldened to further depredations.

Nor was it his way to appeal to the law if he could handle the situation himself. These two Bidwells were not boys, nor were they imbeciles. He could deal with them without equivocation or restraint.

"You may be right, Skelly," he said. "If I knew where I could locate 'em——"

"I think I can show yuh where they are," Skelly said, half turning away to conceal his elation. "They're great fellers tuh hunt when they're not workin', an' there's an old cabin over in the Highhouse hills where they generally hang out. I reckon we'd find 'em there."

"Can yuh tell me how to find it?"

"I might, but it'd be difficult. I'd ruther show yuh. An' I'd kinda feel guilty if I left yuh tuh go up there alone. Better take me an Weeks along."

"All right," Boyce agreed. Apparently these men were trustworthy, and anyway the main thing was to find the Bidwells at the first opportunity.

No particular thought of treachery entered Boyce's mind as he rode with the two men toward the hang-out of the Bidwell brothers. He had suspected them at first, and he still doubted their honesty. Neither did he expect any loyalty from them, but that they were deliberately leading him into a trap did not occur to him.

The region into which they were leading him was too rough to be good range, though the men told him that some of the smaller ranches around Daggett did graze their stock there. However, they encountered none on their journey.

The men were taking a zigzag trail that seemed to Boyce pretty indefinite, but they explained that they were taking this route so that they could not by any chance be seen by the Bidwells until the rendezvous cabin was reached.

Finally the cabin was reached. It stood in a little clearing surrounded by a growth of juniper and dwarf mahogany which concealed it until one was almost at the edge of the clearing. It was an ordinary log cabin and, though the yard indicated that it had been recently used, there was no sign of present occupancy.

Skelly held up his hand and stopped his horse.

"You fellows wait here an' I'll go in an' see if there's anybody home. If they're in there, I won't say anything to you, so purty soon you come in, an' I'll try tuh keep 'em too busy tuh see yuh. If they do start anything I'll be behind 'em. Get me?"

"All right," Boyce agreed.

Skelly rode up boldly to the door, and dismounted. He waited a moment, then lifted the latch and went in. A minute or so later he stuck his head out and called, "Come on in, fellers; nobody here."

Boyce and Weeks rode up and left their horses beside Skelly's. The latter stepped outside.

"Won't do any hurt tuh have a squint in there for some more poison," Skelly stated. "They're livin' here all right."

Boyce stepped unhesitatingly through the open door. The cabin was poorly lighted, and coming from the bright sunlight he could see only with difficulty.

"Git 'em up, hombre," he heard a thick voice order.

Boyce moved, even as he realized that he had walked blindly into a trap. He leaped backward, but bumped hard into Weeks just behind him. The fellow had his hands in the air, but his body was like a rock in resisting Boyce.

"Git 'em up," snarled Skelly just behind Weeks.

Ed Boyce was no man to submit without a struggle. Realizing that he would be shot by Skelly if he tried to get back out through the door he changed his tactics and sprang as far as he could into the middle of the room. At the same time he jerked out his gun.

A gun roared and the bullet flashed just behind Boyce; followed by a hoarse oath of reproof from the voice which had first commanded Boyce to get his hands up.

"Don't shoot—tackle him," bawled the same voice.

Boyce raised his gun to fire in that direction, but his arm was knocked up and the bullet went through the roof. The two shots had filled the dark cabin with the pungent odor of powder smoke and made it still more difficult to see. Before Boyce could do more, he was borne to the ground under a welter of human bodies.

He still had his gun in his hand and he pulled the trigger without any idea of where the bullet would go. "Ow! I'm shot!" yelled a voice.

"Never mind the shot—flatten that damn fool out before he gits somebody else," a voice said excitedly.

Elated by this luck, and feeling sure that no matter where the bullet went it would strike a foe, Boyce again jerked his arm free, elevated the muzzle of his gun as far as it would go and pulled the trigger. He was rewarded with another howl of distress.

Before he could do more, however, he was smashed flat to the floor, and somebody was swinging to the arm that held the gun. Desperately, Boyce dug in his toes and heaved upward. By sheer strength he lifted the men who were on top of him. He thought that if he could once break loose in that smoke-filled room, his foes were as liable to annihilate each other as they were him. By keeping clear he might break away. But just then somebody got his other arm and jerked it from under him. He went down hard, rooting his nose against the hard floor.

Boyce was fighting as he had never fought before. Though there was half a ton of living human flesh upon him, he gathered himself together and actually lifted them all until he was on his feet. He managed to pull the trigger again, but this time nobody was in the road of the bullet, and then the gun was seized and wrenched out of his hand.

He half turned and struggled toward the door with men dripping from every part of his body. But the effort was too much. He stumbled and went down.

He was not quitting yet. Once more, though his wind was almost gone, he got to his knees, and then somebody perhaps had been standing apart, awaiting just such an opportunity, crashed a gun barrel down upon his head. Boyce knew a moment of excruciating agony as a flash of pain stabbed through his nerve centers; then all went black.

He had made a good fight of it, but the odds had been too great.

When he revived his head ached horribly, and he discovered that his hands and feet were bound. A faint smell of powder still lingered in the room but it was much easier to see. He was lying upon his back, but by dint of great exertion, which made it feel as if the top of his head was coming off, he turned over on one side to get a view of the interior of the room. The first man he saw was the traitor, Skelly, and back of him loomed the grinning faces of Hank and Quall Bidwell.

"How you feel, boss?" Skelly queried sardonically.

"Like I'd like to wring yore neck," Boyce retorted.

"Sorry, but I ain't havin' it wrung to-day," Skelly grinned. Then his expression altered, and his face took on a savage leer. "You sure are an easy mark, ain't yuh, Boyce? Fell for everything like a kid fer candy."

"I guess I did," Boyce admitted. "Where is Weeks?"

"Oh, the boys took him to another cabin—didn't want two of you together."

"Mean to say he wasn't in with you?"

"Course not," Skelly said carelessly, but the Bidwells exchanged grins.

"Anyway, I see there was more than the Bidwells in the gang. Who got shot, an' how much?"

"Two of 'em. You shot one feller through the foot, but yuh just shaved off some skin for the other one."

"Too bad."

"Oh, they'll recover."

"I know. That's why I said it was too bad."

"Yeah? Well, yuh won't be talkin' so gay before yuh git outa here," Skelly snarled.

"Just what do you fellows expect to gain by this?"

"Plenty. While yo're bein' held here there'll be stuff stolen from the Clawhammer every day. Not only that but every day a report of it'll go tuh yore boss. How long d'ye think yore job'll last?"

"Say, Skelly, ain't you talkin' too damn much?" Hank Bidwell demanded nervously.

"What difference does it make?" the man retorted. "Before this feller gits loose, he'll be damn glad tuh keep his trap shut."

"You think so?" Boyce taunted, hoping to draw the man out further. He succeeded.

"I do. Lemme tell yuh a good joke. You got some money in the Daggett bank that belongs tuh yore boss. Quite a bunch of it likely. Well, after this ranch is gutted there won't be no money in that bank, an' Barlow, the banker, will swear to yore boss that you come an' drawed every cent of it out. It'll mean jail for you, bo, if yuh linger here after we let you go."

"You mean to say that Barlow is a member of your crooked gang?"

"Oh, no. But if Barlow don't take his orders like a good little boy, his damn two-by-four bank'll be blowed tuh hell with him in it, an' he knows it," Skelly said triumphantly.

"Yo're tellin' too damn much. Keep yore face shut," Quall Bidwell roared, and he bent a threatening glance upon Skelly which temporarily silenced the smaller man.

What the fellow had said didn't make Boyce feel any more cheerful. While he was lying there helpless, the ranch would be systematically plundered and looted, and lying reports would be going forward to his employers which would make them certain that he was responsible.

After all, the officials of the company knew nothing about him except what Uncle Tom Ambergate had told them. These false reports, if what Skelly said was true—and he had no reason to doubt it—would discredit Uncle Tom as well as him. He did not mind it half as much on his own account as he did because the fine old ex-cattleman would be humiliated in the eyes of his associates.

Then another thought caused his bloody fairly to run cold. He had mailed a letter to Ellen, urging her to come on to the ranch at once. She would find him gone and would not be able to understand the reason for his absence. She would not know what to do or think. True, she might start a search for him, but if she did she would antagonize the outlaws and they might seize her. The thought of that nearly drove him to madness.

Involuntarily, he strained against his bonds, but they were on securely and his captors only laughed.

VI

APPROACHING CLOUDS

Ina Bidwell had ridden home in an agony of uncertainty. Her conscience told her she should go to Ed Boyce and tell him of the conspiracy she had overheard. Her loyalty argued that she should keep silent until Roy was out of prison.

First one and then the other side of the question gained the ascendancy, but the one which implied action was never on top long enough to cause her to turn toward the Clawhammer ranch.

Again and again she told herself that he would not be hurt. Both Brig and Ace Highhouse had given assurance of that, for different reasons. He would merely be held a prisoner until he was thoroughly discredited with his employer, and so framed that he would not dare make a defense. He could not appear against Roy and the latter would go free. The Clawhammer, as of yore, would be at the mercy of the Highhouse clan.

And she—she would become the wife of Ace Highhouse, and for all practical purposes dead to the world. Well, when she looked around at the filthy, sordid surroundings of her father's home, it was worth it if Roy could be lifted above it all.

Her reception at home was none too cordial. Her stepmother, once the girl was out from under her tyranny, frankly despised her. The woman said nothing at first till Ina, in response to a question from her father, admitted that she was not going back to Daggett to work.

"If yuh stick around here, yuh can expect tuh work," the woman said grouchily.

"I expect to—and from the looks of things around here there's a lot o' work that needs tuh be done," Ina retorted.

"I don't want none o' yore slurs about my housekeepin'," the woman said angrily.

"No comment upon it is necessary," Ina said with a cool smile, and silenced for the time being the woman's tongue. Mrs. Bidwell knew she had been bested in the exchange, but her slow mind could not fathom how.

"I don't see why yuh had tuh lose yore job an' come back here for me tuh feed," her father grumbled. "There's enough around here as it is, an' this is a dry year. My hay's all burnt up."

"It wouldn't be if you'd get the water out on it," Ina said sharply, and brought down on her offending head the full torrent of parental wrath.

"You kin git right out there an' do some irrigatin' yoreself," Bidwell concluded as he wound up his tirade.

"I'll be glad to," Ina said, and finding an old pair of her overalls, which she usually wore on the place, she took a shovel and went out to irrigate.

As soon as she started, she was joined by the hulking Babe. Despite his mother's efforts to poison his mind against his half sister, he gave her more affection than he did anybody else—far more than he did to his mother. Indeed, there was nothing that he would not do for the girl.

"I'll shovel for yuh, Ina," he told her.

"That'll be fine, Babe," she said. "I knew you would."

Babe would work like a horse when properly directed, but do nothing if left alone. Luther Bidwell was too lazy to even stay out in the sun and have the big, simple fellow do the work so it went undone. But under Ina's direction he soon had a sizable stream of water flowing out where the hay crop was not entirely burned up.

"Babe, you had a fight the other day, didn't you?" she asked.

The big fellow grinned.

"What caused it?" Ina pursued.

"I dunno. Feller was gonna lick Dad, I guess. Dad said jump him an' I did. I sure give him a thumpin'." Babe laughed with childish glee.

"Didn't he—hurt you?"

"Tried to well enough, but I was too strong. I wouldn't even let him use his gun."

"He—tried to do that?"

"Shore," Babe said. "He threatened tuh use it on me, but I never give him no chance."

Babe was not consciously giving the girl any wrong impression of the fight. He was telling the story as it had appeared to his simple brain, but it was far from being an accurate picture. Ina concluded that Boyce had come there and tried to whip her father. For a young, strong man to jump onto an older one much smaller than himself was bad enough. But to try to use a gun on such as Babe was utterly inexcusable. It caused her to feel contempt for Boyce—something she had not felt before. It also determined her to allow him to wiggle out of his pool of trouble through his own efforts.

Still, she dared not abandon the work on the ranch until after the time set for his capture for fear that she would weaken and warn him. And as soon as the time had passed, she was thrown into a fever of uncertainty as she wondered if he might have been killed or badly hurt. It was almost remorse.

She stood it for a day and a half, then saddled up Checkers and rode over to the Clawhammer. Babe had volunteered to accompany her but she wanted to be alone.

As she rode up to the front of the house, she was amazed to see a girl come out on the porch—a girl such as she had never seen before. Ina herself could look well enough in one of Gus Pappas's uniforms, but she knew little of the art of dressing tastefully. But this girl in an unpretentious, serviceable morning dress succeeded in radiating that mystifying thing known as style. Perhaps it was the way she wore her luxurious mass of soft brown hair, or even the way she walked, stood or reclined. Anyway, Ina recognized that here was a lady whose like she had read about but had never met. When she got closer, she saw that the well-groomed appearance was carried out by nice teeth, and pointed, polished finger nails, and by the skillful, scarcely noticeable use of cosmetics.

All this Ina took in almost at a single sweep with the sure appraisement with which one woman judges another. The second glance told her that deep trouble dwelt in this other woman's mind.

At close range, Ina saw that the other woman was younger than she thought. She was not more than twenty-two. She was about Ina's height, but a little fuller in build. She was waiting for Ina eagerly; yet with a certain tense nervousness.

"How-do-you-do," she said a little breathlessly. "Won't you get off your horse and come in?"

"I dunno," the range drawl dropped a little affectedly from Ina's lips. "Do you live here?"

"Well, I—why I—I suppose so. You see, I was to come here to spend the summer with my brother. I wasn't due for about ten days yet, but he wrote and urged that I come at once as he needed me. I came right on. Now, I've been here two days, and I haven't heard a thing of my brother, and I can't find out what's become of him. I'm terribly worried."

"Don't the men know where he's gone?" Ina asked.

"No. They say he's probably gone to some other range to look for cattle and will soon be back. But—somehow—I don't like the way they say it."

Ina was at a loss what to say.

"Won't you please get off and talk to me?" the other girl pleaded, and there was genuine need in her tone. Ina suddenly realized that the girl was scared half to death, as well as being concerned about her brother.

"Serve him right," she told herself, but at the same time she got off of Checkers and went up on the porch.

"Please have a seat," the other girl begged. "I'm Ellen Boyce. Do you live around here?"

"Yeah, I live near here—four miles from here—my name—Ina Bidwell."

"Delighted to know you, Miss Bidwell. But—surely—you don't call four miles 'near'?"

"It's the closest place."

"Oh, dear me."

"Has Skelly been around here?" Ina asked.

"Skelly? Really, I don't know. There have been several men here, but only one, Jack Parmer, I believe, has volunteered his name."

"Don't Jack know where your brother is?"

"No. In fact—I think—he hinted—that something might have happened to Ed. And the Chinese cook

—he looks at me so queerly out of those almond eyes, and I think he's as scared as I am."

"Aw, you're getting all ruffled up over nothing," Ina said. "These cowmen lots of times have to be gone for days at a time."

"I suppose so. I really don't know much about it. You see—I never had to rough it. Ed always worked but he insisted that I go to school. He—he did everything for me. He's the best brother in the world. If —if anything has happened to him——"

"He'll be all right," Ina consoled awkwardly. There were tears in the other girl's eyes, and a sense of guilt in Ina's heart. She knew where Ed Boyce was, and knew that he would not return—soon. By the time he had been missing for several weeks, this girl would be distracted. Quite likely she would try to start a search for Ed, and then she would run afoul of the Highhouse gang.

"There were two old men here this morning who frightened me terribly," Miss Boyce went on. "They looked at me so—so threateningly, and asked me all sorts of impertinent questions, and intimated somehow that Ed wasn't all he should be, and I refused to answer any more questions. Finally they rode away, but they said I'd better not do anything till they got back. Somehow it sounded just like a threat. Could you—could you tell me anything about them?"

Ina could, but she didn't. The old men, she knew, were Brig and Ock Highhouse. She merely shook her head in negation.

"I don't know just why, but there seems to be something ominous in the whole atmosphere of this place," Ellen Boyce said.

"Why don't you do something?" Ina blurted.

"What?" the other girl came back instantly. "I did think of communicating with a friend of ours, but if nothing is the matter, Ed would laugh at me, and I wouldn't like to cause Uncle Tom any trouble. But if Ed doesn't come back within a few days, I'll know something is wrong. He wouldn't have gone away without leaving some word."

Ina realized that if the girl had been wise she would have sent for help at once, but it was not her business to tell her so. In a few days it would probably be too late. She doubted that Miss Boyce would be permitted to send out any message at all now if she wanted to. She could not help seeing what a hold the presence of this girl would give the Highhouses on Ed. It would be just as easy for them to hold her as her brother. Very likely the girl was a prisoner on the ranch at this moment without knowing it. Doubtless the men on the ranch had their orders not to let her leave. Ina had caught a glimpse of Jack Parmer out around the barn. He should have been away riding the range unless he had his orders to do differently.

"That's a beautiful pony you're riding," Ellen Boyce said suddenly.

Ina gave a start. "Yes. He belongs to my brother." Her voice had suddenly turned cold. Reminding her of Roy had renewed her animosity against this girl's brother.

"Oh-h!" Ellen did not seem to know what to say. Presently she began to speak, quite hesitantly, and there was a bit of unnatural color in her cheeks.

"My dear, I—I—know that what I'm going to request is very unusual. You are a stranger to me, but if you live on the nearest ranch surely we can be—neighbors. I wonder if I could prevail upon you to come here and stay with me—till my brother comes home."

Ina was silent, but her mind was working fast. If she stayed here she would be in touch with things, and know what was going on. She told herself that she was allied with the Highhouses; that she had to see that Ed Boyce did not escape his captors until Roy was free, and this would give her an opportunity to help. At the same time she knew that she could not accept this other girl's hospitality, come to her house as a friend, as it were, and then work against her.

"Can't you come?" Ellen repeated.

There was something likable in this other girl's luminous dark eyes, even though she in some way made Ina feel rough and uncouth. She was the sort of person Ina would have liked for a friend—in fact, the girl's life was starved for just such friendships as this strange young woman was offering.

"If you're offerin' to pay me, I reckon I can come," Ina said slowly. "I just lost my job down in the restaurant in Daggett, so I can take another one."

She saw a disappointed look flash across Ellen's face. "Why, of course, if you want to put it on that basis. I'll be glad to pay you," Ellen said. But Ina knew that she had wanted, and expected her to come as a guest. It hurt Ina deeply that she could not come that way; she knew that she would never be able to use a cent of the money so earned for herself, but there would be too much treachery in coming any other way.

"I'll ride home and get my things," Ina said carelessly. She felt contemptible in refusing this proffered friendship, and charging money for staying with this lonely, troubled girl, but she subdued the feeling ruthlessly.

They didn't get along too swimmingly that first night. There was a restraint between them which all the tact of the older woman could not dissipate. There was nothing for Ina to do, for Hung Fat attended to all the housework. Whenever he slithered in from the kitchen, Ina had the uncomfortable feeling that his eyes were boring into her and reading her inmost thoughts. This Chinaman, she was sure, knew what had happened to Boyce but, as it was no concern of his, he was saying nothing about it. Indeed, it would have been unsafe for him to say anything and he perhaps knew it.

Skelly rode in at sundown, and the fellow came grinning to the house when he saw Ina on the porch.

"Well, well, what's happened here? Don't mean tuh say you've come tuh live with us? Parmer said yuh had."

Ina hated the fellow's smirking face. No matter what Boyce was or had done this fellow was a traitor.

"If I have come to stay with Miss Boyce, that's none of your business, Skelly," she said evenly.

"Oh, the hell it ain't? I ain't good enough tuh associate with now that yo're tied up with Ace Highhouse, huh? Well, something might happen tuh Highhouse yet, an' yuh may be glad tuh talk tuh me."

"If nothing happens to him till you cause it to happen, he'll always be safe," she shrugged.

"Say, you be careful. We got orders not tuh let this gal leave the ranch nor send no messages. If you go tuh totin' any for her yuh'll be sorry."

"Oh, go on and play," she said wearily. "I know more about this business than you ever did." She turned away, and after glaring at her a moment the man turned away.

"Was that man threatening you? I watched through my door," Ellen said fearfully.

"No; I was threatening him," Ina said easily. "I warned him not to get fresh around here."

"You're a comfort, dear," Ellen said with a nervous laugh.

Ellen was badly frightened, but Ina saw with approval that her fear was mostly for her brother. She was the kind who would stick to the end for the sake of those she loved, while more daring people would wilt when they saw the situation become hopeless.

It would be only a question of hours until the girl knew the bitter truth, but until that time Ina did her best to make her feel comfortable. It was strange why she persisted in being concerned about this girl and her brother, when they were her enemies, and yet the feeling would not down.

She detected that Jack Parmer wanted speech with her, but it was not until after breakfast the next morning that she contrived to have a word with him.

"Look here, Ina," he said rapidly, "I s'pose you know what all this is about as well as I do. It's all right tuh hold Boyce an' frame him up, but damned if I like the idee o' his sister bein' rung in. She's a lady, an' I'm not goin' tuh stand for Skelly or anybody gittin' rough with her. I wanta know where you stand?"

"They'll not get rough with her while I'm around," Ina said. "But if you value your health, boy, you'll do just what you're told and no more. You can't buck this outfit and you ought to know it."

Young Parmer flushed, and figuratively reared back on his hind legs. "Don't think for a minute that I'm a-scared of anybody in this gang," he declared. "They can't bluff me, an' old Brig wants tuh look out what he does to this girl."

Ina smiled tolerantly and turned away. She didn't expect much from Jack Parmer.

That day was Sunday. Ellen Boyce tried hard to keep a conversation going, but Ina found it hard to respond. The ranch girl was finding she had an unexpectedly tender conscience. She had to whip herself unmercifully to keep up her hatred of Ed Boyce and his sister. The fine quality of Ellen could not be mistaken, and Ina felt as guilty as though she had been robbing an orphan of its last penny. She simply could not respond to the older girl's overtures. Finally Ellen gave over the attempt to talk, and there came into her eyes a new look of suspicion which Ina did not fail to see. She was wondering if this girl who had just seemed to happen along the day before had not been sent for some nefarious purpose.

Ellen Boyce began to feel a black, ghastly fear. If Ed didn't come back within the next twenty-four hours, she determined that she would go back to Daggett and instigate a search for him.

Ina read the other girl's thought, and knew that soon she would have to come out in her true colors. She shrank from the blaze of scorn she knew she would see in the eyes of the girl whom, despite everything else, she wanted for her friend more than she had wanted almost anything else in the world. It was like a hot, sultry day before a storm. She knew a crisis was approaching, but was not sure when or where it would strike.

She was not surprised to see Ace Highhouse riding up that afternoon. He was jaunty and cocksure as ever. Skelly had left the ranch that morning, so Ina was sure that the Highhouses already knew of her presence at the Clawhammer. This was proved when Ace stopped his horse and shouted for her to come out.

"Who is that?" Ellen asked.

"It—it's the man I'm going to marry," Ina answered, the words wrung from her by that peculiarity which made her want to scourge herself as an offset to the mental pain she was enduring.

"Golly, yo're lookin' sweet to-day," Ace greeted. "Gimme a li'l kiss, will ya?"

"No," Ina said flatly. "I want to know what happened to Boyce?"

"Boyce? Oh, he's all right," Ace grinned. "Got a busted head where somebody had tuh pull a gun barrel off his skull, but otherwise he's doin' fine, an' yore dear brothers are nursin' him like'n he was a pet ewe lamb."

"You knew his sister was here?"

"Yeah. An', say, it was skookum idee for you tuh come chum up with her. Her comin' was a break for us. We gotta let Boyce know she's here so he'll be willin' tuh do what we want. You tell her her brother is over at a round-up in Swan Valley, an' that I'm goin' over there an'll take a letter to him if she wants tuh write one. The more scared she is the better it'll be. We'll show Boyce the letter, an' if she tells him she's scared it'll make him twist."

"God, you Highhouses are a heartless crew," Ina burst out bitterly.

"What the hell you croakin' about?" Ace demanded. "We're just doin' what I agreed tuh do for you—keep Boyce outa the way till Roy comes clear. We couldn't turn him loose then without havin' some hold on him."

"You're not fooling me," she said. "I had nothing to do with it. You just want to make it safe to rob the Clawhammer."

"Look here: are you aimin' tuh welch on me?" he asked hotly.

"No, I stick to my word even if I was tricked, but I know yore game," she said. "I'll go get her to write that letter."

"Miss Boyce," she said in a dull tone, "this fellow out here says your brother is on a round-up over in Swan Valley, an' that he's goin' over there himself an' will take a letter if you want to send one."

"Oh, thank God!" Ellen Boyce cried with such infinite relief that involuntary tears sprang to Ina's eyes. She rushed for pen and paper, and Ina leaned against the door while she wrote.

Once or twice Ellen hesitated, and nibbled at the end of her pen. She stole a glance at Ina once which was detected, and then wrote rather hastily. Ina would have given much to know what was in that letter, particularly concerning herself. She was sure it was unfavorable, but she would not have read it had there been an opportunity. That Ace Highhouse would read it was certain.

Ina would have been amazed at the contents of that letter, particularly the reference to herself. It read in part:

> Don't hurry home on my account, Ed. I was a little uneasy at first, but now there's a nice, though rather queer girl by the name of Ina Bidwell staying with me, so I'll be quite all right.

But that letter was destined to make Ed Boyce tear his hair with impotent rage, and no little part of his anger was directed against the girl whom he now knew was a part of the conspiracy against him.

Monday two strange cow-punchers rode up to the Clawhammer, and they were as alike as two peas. Short, rather heavy-set young fellows, brick red in complexion, and with perpetual grins upon their faces. Ina heard Ellen give a gasp of recognition as she saw them, and then the older girl rushed out of the house and sped down the path to meet them. Ina followed as far as the porch. She could easily hear what they said.

"The Dixon boys!" Ellen cried. "I never was so glad to see anybody in my life." She reached up and shook their hands with vast enthusiasm.

"Golly, Miss Ellen, yuh must be lonesome here," one of the twins grinned. "Where's Ed?"

"I don't know. Yes I do, too. They say he's on a round-up in a place called Swan Valley, but I haven't seen him. I've been here nearly a week. He didn't leave any word at all, yet he knew I was coming. I—have been—rather alarmed."

The grins momentarily faded from the twins' faces. "That does seem kinda odd," the spokesman remarked. " 'Tain't like Ed none a tall—considerin' how much he thinks o' you. Me an' Don'll just have a look-see at this said round-up, an' see what he's got tuh say for himself."

"I—I—wish you would, boys," Ellen breathed.

"We'll start pronto," Dan Dixon promised.

The threatened crisis had arrived. If these punchers were allowed to find out that Ed Boyce was not in Swan Valley and never had been, it would start a search for Ed Boyce that would mean trouble. That the Highhouses would permit them to reach Swan Valley was highly improbable. Both Jack Parmer and Skelly knew they were there, and the news would soon be carried to old Brig Highhouse. But these two young fellows didn't look like men who could be bluffed or handled easily.

Across the horizon Ina saw the grim shadow of murder.

VII

AN INTERRUPTED ESCAPE

As yet Ed Boyce had no idea that the Bidwells were not the heads of the outlaw gang which had tricked him. That there were many others in the gang he had had ample evidence, and it did seem that Hank or Quall either one lacked the quality of leadership. For lack of proof of identity of any of the others, save Skelly, he thought of it as the Bidwell gang.

He could get nothing out of his two jailers. They kept his feet tied close together at all times, liberated his hands only long enough for him to eat and then tied them again. He knew it was useless to struggle against the bonds, but nevertheless wrists and ankles quickly developed raw sores.

Boyce was quick to see that there was more back of the thing than the theft of a few colts, or of revenge for the arrest of one member of the gang. It could not be, he believed, that they aimed at anything less than the loot of the whole ranch while he was tied up helpless. At that, his greatest worry was on account of his sister. He did not know when she would arrive, but he wondered over and over again what she would think when she found he was not there. Would the outlaws dare to lay sacrilegious hands upon her? From what he had seen, he believed they would not hesitate at that. His one hope was that Dave Hall, his late boss, would respond to his appeal and send one of the Dixons on to help. Both Dan and Don were capable, resourceful fellows, and they would quickly discover that something was wrong and do something about it.

Then one day Hank Bidwell silently handed him the note Ellen had written. He was eating dinner and his hands were untied. He took the paper questioningly, and his eyes flashed to every corner of the room. He knew that the Bidwells were in constant communication with others, but the men who came there had not ventured inside the cabin. He had heard a horse stop outside the cabin some fifteen minutes before, and heard Hank talking with somebody. The horse had not gone away. He flicked the letter open and a cold chill ran up his spine as he recognized the hand writing. With an effort he controlled his emotions and ran his eye swiftly down the page.

The letter was optimistic, but he could read a nameless terror between the lines. They had told her that he was away on business and she was expecting him home. His gaze dwelt a moment longer on the sentence that referred to Ina Bidwell, and his lips curled in scorn. Obviously the Bidwell girl had been sent to watch Ellen's every movement, and perhaps get her to tell what they wanted to know. Very likely, he thought, Ellen had already confided to her how he came to be foreman of the ranch, and thus gave his enemies a better chance to discredit him with his employers, who were none too keen about the cattle business anyway. Here he was helpless as a sucking calf and Ellen at the mercy of the same unscrupulous crew!

A burst of savage anger welled through him, but it showed only in the swelling veins along his temples. To be held here like a trapped badger while these degenerates had their way with his sister was too much. It were better to have a try for freedom if it killed him than to submit supinely any longer. Determined though he was, he did not let a hint of his intentions escape him.

He methodically folded the letter and placed it beside his plate. Hank Bidwell was standing by the door, watching him with a sardonic grin, while Quall, having wolfed down his food, had retired to a bunk where he was cleaning his six-shooter. This, Boyce thought, was a lucky break for him. Hank must be his primary object of attack, and the present uselessness of Quall's weapon might give him the opportunity to get that of the older brother.

Just to Boyce's right was a heavy iron skillet of the spider variety with a short, thick handle. There was a mess of greasy fried potatoes in it for want of a better utensil to put them upon, and Boyce reached for it as though to get more potatoes. As he picked it up Hank spoke.

"Any news in yore letter?"

"Plenty," Boyce said, and turning on the bench he was sitting upon he hurled the skillet with unerring aim straight at Hank Bidwell's head.

The rim of the skillet struck Hank on the bridge of the nose and caused a deep gash from which the blood came in spurts. The fellow was knocked reeling against the wall with a howl of pain, and the blood and potatoes together half blinded him.

There was a bellow from Quall who sprang to his feet to come to the aid of his brother. But with the same movement which threw the skillet Boyce leaped to his feet, overturning the bench. With lips drawn back like a wolf's Boyce bounded across the room. With two tremendous leaps he was upon Hank Bidwell. Hank threw up his arms in defense and the shove he gave threw Boyce off balance and toppled him to the floor. But as he fell Boyce's long arms shot out and drew Hank into a clinch. They struck the floor together.

Boyce was terribly handicapped by his feet being tied together, and he knew that his only chance lay in getting possession of Hank's gun before Quall could lay him out. But his arms were good, and under ordinary circumstances he was easily a match for Hank Bidwell, who was far inferior in strength to his brother. With a swift roll Boyce got on top of Hank, and fairly smothered him by the desperation of his efforts. His arms were outside the other man's, pinioning them to the sides, and he screwed the top of his head beneath Hank's chin and bored upward till it seemed the fellow's neck would crack.

At the same time Boyce worked his left hand down toward the gun in Hank's holster, but he found Hank's fingers had closed on it ahead of him. Their combined efforts jerked the gun out of the holster, but Hank clung to the handle of it like grim death.

Boyce had turned slightly over on one side to keep an eye upon Quall. He knew the other Bidwell's gun was empty and Quall had not stopped to reload it. Spraddling his sturdy legs Quall set himself and then brought the barrel of his gun straight down for Boyce's head with force enough to fell an ox. Out of the corner of his eye Boyce saw it coming, and just before the blow landed he jerked his head away and the full force of the blow landed right where his head had been, on Hank's chin. There was one muffled croak from Hank, and one outlaw was out of the picture.

As Hank's hand went limp Boyce twisted the gun out of it, and without bothering to transfer it to his right hand pointed the business end of it toward Quall, who had had trouble recovering his balance, and was, besides, half shocked into inertia by the unexpected effect of his blow.

"Back up an' raise your hands!" Boyce rasped. "Jump!" The hard note of authority was unresistible. Quall straightened with a jerk, and his hands went toward the ceiling.

"What the hell—" suddenly demanded a voice from the doorway. Ace Highhouse, hearing the commotion, had started in to investigate, gun in hand. Before he comprehended just how things stood, Boyce had sighted him, and swung the gun in his direction, though he failed to get a look at the fellow's face.

"Up with 'em," Boyce snapped, but the moment he shifted his gun in the other direction Quall Bidwell leaped.

Just in time Boyce swung the gun back and pulled the trigger. He could easily have shot Quall Bidwell through the heart—in fact, it would have required less effort to hit him there than elsewhere. But at the very instant he pulled the trigger something restrained him; jerked at his hand with almost a physical compulsion. Instead of letting the bullet drive into his foe's body he deliberately aimed for the shoulder. It stopped Quall and straightened him up. He grabbed his shoulder with a whimper of pain, and whirled across the room to bring up against the table with a crash.

Boyce could not have explained why he had spared the fellow's life, but he did know that it had flashed through his mind that Quall was Ina Bidwell's brother, and simultaneously with that thought he had changed his aim.

With the smoke rolling from his gun Boyce spun it back to meet the invader in the door, and gave a convulsive roll. A bullet missed him by an inch and pelted into the floor of the cabin. Boyce fired hurriedly as he saw the man in motion, but instead of coming forward the man leaped back. Boyce's bullet threw splinters from the door jamb, and then a vacancy appeared.

Like a flash Boyce again threw down on Quall Bidwell. "Stop yore damn whimperin', get a knife and cut my legs loose before I drill you through the guts," he ordered tersely.

Quall Bidwell perhaps realized how close he had been to reaching for his harp, and had no desire to test his luck further. He forgot his paining shoulder, reached in his pocket for his clasp knife and opened it hurriedly with his teeth.

Boyce lay where he could watch both Bidwell and the door, but the thumping of a horse's feet convinced him that the man outside, whom he had been unable to identify, had chosen discretion in preference to valor. Then Quall Bidwell's knife bit through the ropes between Boyce's ankles and they were free.

Getting to his feet Boyce stamped tentatively several time to make sure that his legs would play no tricks upon him, and then turned to the door. For fear that the other man might still be lurking outside he made Quall walk out ahead, but there was no sign of Ace Highhouse. Rather than take chances on getting himself shot young Highhouse had wisely chosen to go for help as quickly as possible.

"Where are your horses?" Boyce demanded.

"They're staked out 'bout a quarter of a mile from here," Quall answered.

"Lead me to 'em, an' if you're lying God help you," Boyce gritted.

He found out that Quall had told the truth, but it took time to reach the horses and return to the cabin and saddle one of them. By the time this was accomplished he knew that the other man would be several miles upon his way. Boyce chose the best horse, but allowed Quall to retain the other one. The man was losing blood fast and Hank was in a bad way. If they were left alone it might be many hours before they received help. Boyce was not heartless enough to inflict needless suffering.

"I'm leavin' you this horse only so you can ride for a doctor, but if you linger on the way long enough to notify somebody that I've escaped you'll pay for it if I ever catch you again," he warned.

"All I want is tuh git this damned hot lead fished outa me," Quall groaned. The man's eyes, however, were full of hate; with no thought of gratitude for the fact that his life had been spared.

Boyce headed at once for the Clawhammer. He believed the ranch would be in possession of his foes, but his one thought was to get Ellen out of their hands. If he could get there before they knew of his escape, he felt sure he would have a good chance. But if the man who had run away had gone at once to the Clawhammer they would be looking for him, and he would be assured of a warm reception.

It was a hard ride from the Highhouse hills to the

Clawhammer ranch, and in his great haste Boyce showed his horse little mercy. The animal was all but exhausted when the ranch buildings rose in sight.

The place seemed curiously still. No smoke funneled from the stovepipe; no stock lazed about the corrals. He flashed a glance toward the colt pasture which he had watched so jealously, and he saw that it was empty. The Bidwells had at last succeeded in stealing the thoroughbreds. He didn't know it then but the outlaws had also by this time driven away most of his cattle to a place where they could be held temporarily with great ease.

He stopped his fagged-out horse close to the house and shouted, but there came no answering shout, nor what he had most hoped to see—the sweet face of his sister. The silence was painful.

Dismounting, Boyce ran up the path toward the house. Both front and back doors were open, and the cold chill of fear crawled over the ranch manager and slowed his steps. He dreaded to step inside for fear of what he might find.

With iron resolution, he finally entered, and sped from room to room. To his great relief there was no sign of any struggle. He could find no trace of Ellen's belongings, but somehow it seemed, more from the atmosphere of the place than anything else, that it had been abandoned in a great hurry.

Boyce suddenly bethought himself of the Chinese cook. Hung Fat had been on the ranch when he came, but surely the Oriental was not one of the outlaws, and he should be about the place somewhere.

"Hung Fat! Hung Fat!" he called loudly.

Presently there was some sort of commotion up near the rafters, and then the Chinaman's legs dangled through a small trapdoor leading to the loft. He dropped to the floor with a soft thud. His head and shoulders were dusty and covered with cobwebs.

"What are you doin' up there? What's happened?" Boyce demanded.

"No likee this place. Too damn many eyes all time watchee. T'ink mebbso takee Flench leave. Glet all leady an' heah hloss come chop-chop. Climb up in loof till hloss go chop-chop away," Hung Fat explained.

"Tell me: what became of the lady who was here?"

"Yestleday two stlange lidahs come—stlange missee she muchee glad to see—makee much talk. Blimeby othah young missee—one call Ina—she makee much talk. Then flust young lady she make leady to lide autobell, an' go way with two stlangahs."

"Did anybody try to stop 'em?" Boyce queried.

"Skelly he makee big talk, an' wave smoke-stick. Stlangahs they belly quick with smoke-stick, too, an' tell Skelly an' Jlack Pamah back up, an' go jump in lake."

Boyce could pretty well envision what had happened. The two strangers were the Dixon twins. Ellen had become alarmed and had instructed them to take her away. Skelly and Parmer had tried to stop them, but the Dixons were not to be stopped. He smiled a bit at this. Those two outlaws must have got the surprise of their lives.

"Which way did they go—the young lady and the strangers, I mean?"

"Make fast tlacks towa'd Daggett," Hung Fat informed.

Boyce was infinitely relieved at that. Ellen would be safe, and if he knew anything at all about the Dixon twins, and he thought he did, they would be back to see what it was all about.

"This other girl—Miss Ina—what became of her after they left?"

"She talkee too much to Skelly an' he glet plenty mad; she make shootum talk an' Skelly lun like hellee. Then missee, she ketchum checkaboa'd hloss an' lide way towa'd home," Hung Fat related with considerable glee.

"Couldn't stop the Dixon boys from takin' Ellen away, an' then had a row among themselves," Boyce commented. This gave him a grim sort of satisfaction.

Meantime Boyce was aware that he must be moving. This had all happened yesterday, and doubtless by this time the Dixon boys were back somewhere on the range. But his best chance to get in touch with them was to go to Daggett. Anyway, he wanted to find

Ellen and relieve her fears. And soon after that, just as soon as he got around to it, he was going to have another talk with Ina Bidwell. He was angry with the girl, but even yet not resentful enough to want to send her to the penitentiary, but unless she altered her ways he realized that that was what would happen to her.

Quall and Hank Bidwell would now be easy to round up on account of their injuries, and he knew there must be two other men in the country nursing bullet wounds. This, too, should help in rounding up the gang. And he sincerely trusted that they had filed a report against him with Barlow the banker.

But things were not going to move as smoothly for him as he imagined. Just then Hung Fat gave a squeal, climbed to the top of a table, and from there leaped toward the trap door like a frog, caught the edge of it with his hands and drew himself out of sight.

"Boss man bettah hide," he adjured. "Heah plenty hloss come chop-chop. Mebbeso look fo' boss man."

Boyce sprang to the door, and he counted five men approaching the house at a dead gallop. Undoubtedly it was a posse of the outlaws which had been raised by the man who had fled from the cabin. Farther back he saw three more men coming. If he tried to hide they would find him, because the horse he had ridden was in plain sight. If he tried to run they would soon overtake him because his horse had given out. There was nothing for it but to stand his ground and make a fight. Outnumbered eight to one there looked to be little chance for victory. The best he could hope for was to stand a siege until help arrived.

VIII

A CALL ON THE SHERIFF

A COMPLETE change had come over Ina Bidwell when she realized that the two young strangers were riding to their death. If they went to Swan Valley she was certain they would never return. They would be waylaid one way or the other, for the Highhouses had gone too far now to back down, and they could not afford to have their rule of the Daggett country threatened by a pair of casual interlopers.

If she let them go without a warning, Ina felt that she would be just as guilty of their murder as those who actually did the killing.

But to tell the truth meant to incriminate herself and her whole family. Nobody would understand her motives; that everything had been done to shield an innocent boy who needed his chance in the world. Already she anticipated the cool scorn that would soon be in the eyes of this other girl. But she had to tell her before the two riders left the place.

"They'd better not go to Swan Valley," she said in a dull tone.

"Why not?" Ellen demanded quickly. Another moment, Ina thought, and the girl would erupt with an outburst of anger. If she was like her hot-tempered brother she would.

"Because they won't find your brother there. He's never been there."

"He—hasn't—been there? Just what do you mean?"

"There isn't any round-up in Swan Valley, an' hasn't been. That man lied to you yesterday."

For a long minute Ellen Boyce merely stood there, looking at the younger girl with a peculiar, somber expression in her dark eyes. "You knew that when I wrote the letter?" she asked quietly.

Ina nodded, a bit sullenly, and steeled herself for the storm which she knew was about to break. Instead, Ellen only asked quietly, "Why didn't you tell me then?"

"Things were different then. These two men hadn't come here. I know that if they go to Swan Valley they'll be killed."

"You didn't want me to know where my brother was, and you are undeceiving me now because the Dixon boys may be killed if you don't. Won't you tell me why?"

To Ina's amazement the other girl's tone was kindly. Her eyes were soft; there was a trace of tears in them.

"Yes, I'll tell you," Ina said with short, staccato sentences. "Your brother had mine locked up on a charge of horse stealing. He was going to send him to the penitentiary. He's innocent. I tried to tell your brother so, but he wouldn't listen. Two of my brothers are thieves, but this one isn't. To keep him from being sent up an' having his life spoiled, I made a deal to have your brother kidnaped and held until after the trial."

"And these men who are holding Ed—they would kill him to keep him from being liberated before the trial?"

Still there was no anger in those luminous dark eyes. Looking into their clear depths, Ina found herself wanting to put herself straight, but not knowing how to do it.

"Yes; they'd kill him before they'd let him go," she admitted.

"Just to keep him from that trial?"

"No," Ina said with a flush, "there's other reasons."

"Won't you tell me what they are?"

Ina shook her head stubbornly. "All I can say is that your brother won't be hurt unless somebody tries to find him. Call these men off, and you'd better get back to Daggett yourself before something happens. You'll only be putting all of you in danger if you keep on."

"You said you made a deal to have my brother kidnaped," Ellen said. "What consideration did you give?"

"That's my business," Ina said shortly.

"I think I know," Ellen said softly. "You said you were to marry that man who took my note. I watched your face when you told me. You don't love that man, Ina—you hate him."

Ina could feel the blood swarming under the skin of her face and hated her inability to control it. "Well, what of it?" she demanded.

"You and I have got to have a long talk," Ellen Boyce said firmly. "You have done a desperate thing because you love your brother. Perhaps I love mine just as dearly. I'll tell the Dixon boys not to leave the ranch just yet, and then you must tell me about your brother. I won't ask you to betray your friends, but if Ed has been unjust to you I want to know it."

The girl had taken the one course to win Ina's confidence. Ina felt the need of justifying herself, and especially to make the other girl understand about Roy. Before she knew it, she was telling all about her home life; about her ambition to send Roy to school, and finally about what had led up to the present trouble. Ellen listened sympathetically, and put in a shrewd question now and then that helped to clarify things. Primarily her desire, and it was a desperate one, was to get information that would enable her to help her brother, but as she listened she realized with keen feminine intuition that Ina Bidwell was honest, and was telling her the truth. She knew, too, just how hot-headed Ed was. She felt that he had been rash in his treatment of Roy Bidwell, but his rashness had been justified—seeing that he was a man.

At the same time, Ellen knew that something had been held back. It was not for this murder impended. Ina's whole manner was a silent confession that there was something else. How to get at the truth was the question.

"Why were these men so ready to kidnap Ed?" she asked.

Again there was a telltale flush on Ina's cheeks. "Well, they had business with him of their own," the girl confessed. "I happened to overhear a conversation, an' I found out they'd have took him anyway if I hadn't made—my bargain."

Suddenly Ellen's arms went around the younger girl. "You poor, harried dear! I think I understand what you've been through. But no matter what happens to your brother, you can't continue to associate with criminals. You're much too fine for that. If robbery is their motive, and I think it is, you can't join them. You're not a thief."

"I am," Ina said dully. "I was a thief when I come here an' wouldn't stay unless you paid me, an' I was just staying to watch you."

"I guessed that, too," Ellen said. "I'm going to make Ed understand about your brother and see that he gets free. This isn't a bribe. I'll do it regardless of what you do, because I think it is justice. But won't you be fair to yourself, and to me, and tell me about these men?"

Ina shook her head. She had been won over. Ellen Boyce had made her see that no matter what happened to her it was her duty to oppose the crooked machinations of the Highhouse clan. But that didn't mean that it was best to tell Ellen what she knew. The Highhouses were more powerful than this girl could realize. If Ellen knew where her brother was, she would take steps to liberate him, and it would probably mean his death, and others. Far better, she thought, to let things take their course. All he had to lose was a job, if nothing was done. That would be better than losing his life. As for her, Ace Highhouse would exact his price, and she would pay it.

"No; I can't tell you any more," she refused. "Go home and wait for him. Don't even stop in Daggett. The—the—men who hold him run that town, too. Anybody there who might befriend you would probably be killed on account of it. They may even try to keep you from leavin' the ranch to-day, but I don't think Jack Parmer will do much, an' these two men ought to handle Skelly. If they can't, I've got my brother's gun, and I can use it."

It was apparent to Ellen that she had influenced the girl just as far as she could. She took her story that the outlaw gang could intimidate a whole town with a grain of salt; but nevertheless it seemed best to withdraw from the ranch immediately. Not only on her own account but to save the Dixon boys. Once in town, she would see what she could do about rescuing Ed.

"Very well," she conceded. "I have been terribly frightened here, and I don't care to remain. But unless I know more about this, I'm afraid I must ask the Sheriff to help me."

"I warn you you'd better not," Ina said grimly.

Ellen had another talk with the Dixon brothers, and one of them went out to a shed and backed the ranch automobile out. They were going to ride the horses they had hired in Daggett back to town, while Ellen herself was to drive the car. It was agreed that they were to ride fast enough, or she drive slow enough for them to keep together.

The car had no more than left its shed before Skelly and Parmer appeared. Both outlaws had been watching the proceedings with an anxious eye since the arrival of the two strangers. Now they decided it was time to act.

"Hey, where yuh goin' with that car?" Skelly demanded rudely.

"Joy ridin', buddy," Don Dixon grinned as he threw the car into reverse and stepped on the gas. It whizzed backward so fast that the two ranchmen had to jump lively to keep from being bumped. Before they could recover Don had shifted to forward, and the car stopped with a flourish in front of the house. Meantime, his brother Dan sat his horse close by and grinned coolly down at the enraged outlaws. But his right hand was never far from the handle of his gun.

Skelly came storming and swearing up to the car, with Parmer a few strides behind him.

"Say, think you can steal a car right under my nose?" the former said hoarsely. "You put that gas buggy right back where yuh got it."

"An' what if we don't, bozo?" Dan Dixon queried softly.

Then took place the bit of action which Hung Fat had sketched quite thoroughly for Ed Boyce.

"I'll show yuh," Skelly raged, and unwisely reached for his gun. Parmer, after a belated start, also went for his.

But the Dixon twins had moved with bewildering speed. Dan, on his horse, was no faster than Don in the front seat of the car. Like they had both been pulled by invisible strings their hands went spasmodically downward, and then up. One gun was pointed at Skelly, the other at Parmer.

"Did yuh say yuh'd show somebody?" Don queried gently.

Skelly dropped his gun like the handle had suddenly turned hot. Parmer grinned sheepishly and tried to pretend that he had never reached for his.

"This'll mean jail for you," Skelly gritted.

"I hardly think so," Ellen said as she got into the car. "I'm assuming all responsibility for this." She had been a witness to the bit of gunplay, and for a second her heart had been in her mouth. The Dixon boys, however, had lived up to the reputation which Ed had given them, and she quickly lost her fear. She was also profoundly glad to be away from the place where, despite her efforts to be calm, her stay had been a thing of terror.

She looked at Ina Bidwell, now standing straight and lonely on the porch, and her heart melted with pity. "Please, dear, won't you come along?" she begged.

"No," Ina said coldly.

"But you can't stay here—alone," Ellen pointed out.

"I'm goin' home," Ina said in the same flat tone.

Reluctantly Ellen took the steering wheel and started the car. With one of the Dixon boys on either side she rolled out of the yard. They urged her to greater speed until their horses were on a keen run. This speed they maintained until they knew they were out of danger from the ranch. Once Ellen glanced back, and Ina was still standing there.

As soon as the car had disappeared in a cloud of its own dust, Skelly rushed up to the porch. "What the hell does this mean?" he shouted. "What have you been tellin' this jane?"

"It's none o' your business what I've told her, and your guess is as good as mine as to what it meant," Ina answered.

"I think you've double-crossed us," the man snarled. "If you have——"

"I wouldn't say too much, Skelly," Ina cut in coldly. "Brig Highhouse is apt to ask why you didn't stop 'em, isn't he?"

"If you'd done something—give us a warnin', or anything, we'd have stopped 'em dead," the fellow said. "Lettin' them go'll raise hell with things; don't yuh know it? One o' them fellers told Parmer they was goin' tuh Swan Valley tuh see their boss. How come they changed their minds? I think you told 'em somethin', you——"

"Stop it!" Ina cried sharply. "I don't have to listen to you an' I won't."

"The hell yuh won't," the man blustered, and stopped with open mouth as a six-gun appeared miraculously in the girl's hand. She had been standing with folded arms, and the gun in her right hand had been concealed under her left arm. It had been in that position from the time Don Dixon had gone after the car.

"You get to hell out of here, both of you," she said shrilly. "Climb your horses an' ride. I'm sick of the sight of you. If you're not moving in ten seconds, I'll show you how good I can shoot."

They didn't tarry to test her sincerity. Skelly, in particular, moved with more rapidity than grace. In three minutes the men were in the saddle and were leaving the place.

Ina watched them out of sight, then walked out and caught and saddled Checkers, made a bundle of the things she had brought, and without paying any attention to Hung Fat, the only remaining person on the ranch, rode slowly homeward.

To Ina, it appeared that there was nothing to do but wait for the Highhouses to finish their business with Ed Boyce, unless his sister and the two young punchers who had arrived did something to goad them into violent action. She had tried to impress it upon Ellen Boyce that search for Ed would insure his death, and she felt that the girl would be disinclined to take the chance when she had time to think it over.

The next day, however, she could not resist the urge to go to Daggett to find out what Ellen had done. Before she got away she had a row with her folks.

"You can't be traipsin' around over the country all the time an' expect me tuh do fer you whenever yuh feel like comin' home," her stepmother said furiously.

Ina had cleaned up the cabin—the first time in months that it looked fit for human habitation, and her stepmother had done little while she was there except lie on the bed and growl. Ina could not help calling a few things to the woman's attention, and thereby got herself into more hot water. Finally her father took a hand.

"If you expect tuh come here fer me tuh feed, yuh gotta stay home an' work an' do what yore ma says," he grunted. Ina knew that he stood in mortal fear of the woman himself—fear that she would make him go to work.

Thoroughly disgusted, Ina saddled Checkers and rode away. She knew that she might have to come back temporarily, but considering what she had to come back to, even marriage with Ace Highhouse did not seem so bad. She would have boarded in town, only that the few dollars she had saved might yet be needed in Roy's defense.

She went at once to the jail to see Roy. He had heard nothing of recent occurrences on the Clawhammer, and she did not enlighten him.

"You don't need to worry, Roy," she smiled. "Boyce isn't going to appear against you."

"How do you know, Sis?" he asked eagerly. "Did he say so?"

"He didn't tell me so, but I got it from others who know."

"Ina, the Highhouses mean business. They'll make it mighty disagreeable for that fellow. In fact, they won't rest till they run him away. Have they done anything yet?" he asked.

"I couldn't say," she said wearily. "But, Roy, I want you to promise me that you won't never have anything to do with the Highhouses—or with Hank and Quall."

"Of course."

"And I want you to leave this country as soon as you get out. I don't suppose I'll be able to help you any more, but don't you give up goin' to school."

"I won't. But don't think I'm goin' to leave you here. You're goin' out with me."

She shook her head slowly. "I—I—can't."

"I'd like tuh know why not?" he said vigorously.

"There's nothin' to hold you. Why, you've even lost your job with that greasy Greek. An' you can't go back to Grizzly Creek to stay."

"We won't talk about it," she said, and forced herself to assume an air of cheerfulness.

She visited a long time with Roy, then wandered up the main street toward the hotel. She passed it without seeing anything of Ellen Boyce, and then went on to the lawyer's office. She had a long wait before she had an interview with the man, and then it took him a long time to tell her nothing. She was surprised to find the afternoon nearly gone when she came out. The first thing she saw was Quall Bidwell dismounting from a horse in front of a doctor's office. She could see that he was hurt.

"Quall, what's happened to you?" she demanded, running over to him.

"That damned Boyce shot me, an' I guess he's killed Hank," the man said. "Lemme go—I'm bleedin' tuh death."

The fellow's face was white from loss of blood and pain, and Ina supported him across the sidewalk with her strong young shoulder. But there was information she had to have before they entered the doctor's office.

"What happened to Boyce? Did he escape?" she asked frantically.

"Yeah, he got away on Hank's horse, but Ace Highhouse got away durin' the fight an' went for help. I reckon they'll kill the devil 'fore he gits away. I hope so."

Ina helped her half brother into a chair and then collapsed into one herself. This, truly, was something she had not anticipated. It had never occurred to her that Boyce might escape by his own efforts. What a man he must be to overcome three such men as her half brothers and Ace Highhouse! But could he eventually escape? In view of that letter from Ellen, he would surely head directly for the Clawhammer, and his foes might overtake him before he left. It was to her interest that he be held until after Roy's trial, but the matter had become too serious altogether. If Hank had been killed already, other killings would follow. She knew that she was to blame for Boyce being kidnapped, or whatever it was, and she felt that it could have been avoided had she only told him what she had overheard there at the spring. Her conscience could not be quelled.

She heard the doctor telling Quall that his wound was slight, and that he would not have to go to bed. Suddenly she knew that she could not rest until she knew that Ed Boyce was safe.

"Quall," she said, when she accompanied her half brother to the street, "you'd better go to the hills and hide out. That man will surely have you arrested if he catches you."

"I'll kill him if I ever meet him again," Quall raged.

"Never mind that. Are you sure Hank is dead?"

"Him?" Apparently he had forgotten his words of a few minutes before. "No; I reckon he ain't dead, but he was sure knocked out."

"Then listen: If he ain't dead you an' him move to that old cabin where the miner died up on Skunk Creek. I'll bring you supplies. If you don't you'll be in jail with Roy."

"All right, Ina. But that damn foreman can't git away with nothin' here. Brig Highhouse'll run him out," Quall said hopefully.

Ina was convinced herself that Boyce could not cope with the Highhouses. Their hold upon the country was of too long standing, and too strong. But he would surely try to lodge complaints against the men who had abducted him. She had no love for Hank and Quall, and with good reason, but she resolved that Boyce should not have the satisfaction of sending any more Bidwells to prison. Meantime, she wanted to make sure that his enemies did not kill him.

As she walked down the street, after having seen Quall leave town, she met the Sheriff.

"Mr. Colton," she said breathlessly, "my brother Quall was just here. He said there was a bunch of rustlers from Plummer's Hole tryin' to run some horses away from the Clawhammer ranch, and they even threatened to burn the buildings. Hadn't you better take a posse and go right out there?"

"Quall said so? Well, Quall is an awful liar," the Sheriff said bluntly. "But of course——"

"They shot him," she said without a quiver. "If you don't believe it go ask Dr. Watts."

"By gum! If that's the case, I'll gather a posse an' rush right out," the officer said.

Ina heaved a sigh of relief as she saw the Sheriff and a dozen men dashing wildly out of town. If Boyce was trapped at the Clawhammer, his foes would raise the siege when they saw the Sheriff coming.

As she turned back to get her horse, she saw Ellen Boyce talking with the two strange punchers who had rescued her from the Clawhammer. She would have walked past had not Ellen called to her.

"Ina, haven't you heard anything from my brother?" she asked anxiously. "These boys have been out looking, but they haven't found any trace of him. And the officers here—they're impossible. They refuse to believe that anything has happened to Ed. They say if he has been kidnaped that it's just a rough cowboy joke, and they refuse to do anything."

"If it was a joke, they've been playing rough," Ina said. "One of my brothers just came to town with a bullet in his shoulder where your brother plunked him."

"Oh, I wish I could be friends with you," Ellen cried. "Won't you tell me where Ed is?"

"I'll tell you this much," Ina said. "Your brother escaped from where they were holding him. He ought to be here in town soon. If I was you I wouldn't leave."

She walked away, leaving Ellen and the Dixon twins gazing after her in dumfounded amazement.

IX

A PROBLEM IN MOTIVES

THE ranch house at the Clawhammer did not look like a very good place to stand a siege. There were entirely too many doors and windows for one man to watch. Boyce realized that he would have to revolve like a buzz saw if he kept his foes from gaining entrance at some point or another. Besides, the house was the first place they would look, and if he was elsewhere there might possibly be a chance for him to slip away unseen.

He cast his eye over the outbuildings on the place, but there seemed to be some objection to them all. There was a small, high granary from the top of which he could command a view in every direction, but the walls were of inch boards and easily riddled with bullets. A low, sturdy, log chicken coop offered protection, but the only openings were in front, and he would probably be burned out. The stables were all objectionable for the same reason. Then his eye chanced to light upon a rock foundation upon a little knoll a hundred yards from the house. Here some previous owner had thought to build a new and better house, but had progressed only so far as the foundation. The rock work was about two feet high, and on the outside of the same thickness. The inner walls dividing the rooms were thinner, but ample to afford protection. Boyce thought that he could command a view here from any direction, and be fairly well sheltered. There would be no roof, and no water, but then he could not hope to hold out long anyway unless help unexpectedly came.

He had resolved not to accept capture again. If the worst came, he would walk out on his foes and go down firing. They should never see the palms of his hands.

He rushed into his room where he had left his rifle, a splendid new Savage .303, but like everything else of value on the ranch it had disappeared. With it he could have dealt out deadly execution upon his foes. Now he had to depend solely upon the Colt's .45 he had taken from Hank Bidwell. And he had not too much ammunition for that.

He was just crawling over the top of the crumbling rock foundation when he heard a yell of discovery. His foes spread out and rode at a run to surround the place where he had taken refuge. He snuggled down below the level of the foundation, and found that the floor joists which had been built in had been later removed, and these gave him loopholes through which to shoot without exposing himself.

The outlaws had handkerchiefs over their faces. They were dressed in usual range garb, chaps, overalls, and for the most part dark flannel shirts—nothing distinctive about any of them. The only thing Boyce could see that differentiated any one of them was a patch of broad, brown beard visible on one man's chest below the handkerchief. There was not over two inches of it in sight, but Boyce knew he was not going to forget that beard if he ever got out of the mess he was in.

The outlaws went to work like they meant business. Boyce wondered where the Bidwells got all their assistance. Somehow, these fellows impressed him as having rather more fighting qualities than either Quall or Hank Bidwell, despite the fact that he could not doubt the latter's meanness.

The range was long for a six-shooter, but Boyce could not resist taking a shot at the bearded leader of the outlaws. A timely jab with the spurs saved the man from absorbing a bullet which would have given him trouble even if it hadn't proved fatal. As it was it tore a hole through the back of his shirt. It was close enough to alter his ideas about getting too close. There were too many foes, and his cartridges were too scarce for Boyce to waste in fancy shooting. He meant every bullet to kill.

His bullets was a signal challenge to the outlaws, and they peppered lead into the old foundation as they circled it at top speed. Boyce was annoyed by the chips of rock which sprinkled him as they were cut loose by the bullets striking the top of the masonry, but he kept his head down to protect his eyes and bided his time.

Having circled the foundation and dealt out what they considered a proper warning, the outlaws withdrew to a safe distance and halted. There were two of them at each side to insure that the besieged man did not slip away.

One man lifted his sombrero and held it aloft for a truce. "Hey, Boyce," he called loudly. "No use yuh stickin' there. Come on out an' surrender. Yuh can't git away."

"Come up an' git me," Boyce yelled back defiantly. He wished that he had a rifle. At that distance he knew that he could drill the rascal plumb center.

Somebody popped a bullet against the foundation from the other direction, but it failed to bother Boyce. Because the foundation was on a knoll the outlaws couldn't put a bullet inside it except by shooting into the air and letting it drop there. If they got close enough to shoot inside from the backs of their horses, Boyce could do some shooting himself. He asked nothing better.

The outlaw leader was disposed to argue. "What yuh expect tuh gain by holdin' out?" he demanded. "Yuh can't git away, an' yuh'll die from thirst."

"When I come out to yuh crooks, I'll come a-shootin'," Boyce answered. He accompanied the threat with another bullet, but the diminishing speed of the slug caused it too fall directly under the nose of the man's horse. The animal jerked up its head as though stung, and whirled so rapidly that its rider was half unseated.

"Use yore rifles, boys, an' shoot him outa there," the spokesman ordered in a rage, and with as little compunction as though Boyce had been a squirrel in a tree.

The outlaws dismounted, after removing their horses to safety and throwing themselves flat on their bellies began a steady bombardment of the rock wall. Now, Boyce realized, the siege had begun in deadly earnest. All he could do was hug the ground and wait for the storm to subside. To attempt to reply at that range with his revolver was absurd.

Whenever a bullet struck the old, dry mortar it would pulverize it. This would loosen the rocks and perhaps the next bullet would roll the rock down on the inside of the wall. Slowly, but surely, the wall was being pounded to pieces. By moving about Boyce was able to keep himself out of immediate danger, but he dared not lift his head above the level of the foundation.

It was turning dark, and soon the outlaws would begin to creep closer. Boyce credited them with fighting intelligence, and felt sure that while perhaps half of them would remain nearly where they were to deceive him by the flashes of their guns, the other half would crawl up toward the foundation in hopes of getting a shot at him at close range. It would be good strategy, but it would also be what he wanted them to do. When it became darker he would be able to peer over the foundation once in awhile without too much risk of getting the top of his head shot off. And some skulker might become the snipee instead of the sniper.

He had time to wonder about a lot of things. Was Hung Fat still cowering in the loft of the ranch house, or would the Oriental be streaking it for town. There was a possible hope for rescue there, but a much better bet was Ellen and the Dixon boys. Surely they would again return to the ranch to see if he had not showed up. He was not discouraged as yet, only—he hoped that Ellen would not come herself. Anything was better than for her to come in contact with this murderous outfit. And he hoped that the Dixon boys would think to use some discretion.

An occasional star became visible in the firmament, and then they began to come out like the sparks from a firecracker. Boyce crawled from side to side of his fort and stole glances along the gentle slopes of the knoll. He saw nothing, but of a sudden he heard what Hung Fat would have described as many horses coming chop-chop. It was no band of loose horses, he knew, for they were following the road, and coming at too steady a gait.

The elation he felt diminished perceptibly as he realized that this might mean only the coming of more outlaws. His fears upon this point were relieved a few minutes later when he saw his assailants legging it rapidly for their horses.

At considerable risk that they might turn on him he leaped from his shelter and ran down the slope in pursuit, hoping that something might happen to put one of the outlaws within reasonable firing distance. Such luck was not to be his, and before the new arrivals hove in sight the gang was away.

Then Sheriff Colton and his party dashed up and pulled their horses to a stop.

"What's doin' here?" the Sheriff demanded. "We thought we heard shootin'."

"You did. The Bidwell gang just tried to bump me off," Boyce said. "One of you let me have your horse an' I'll help you chase 'em."

" 'Fraid there's not much chance," the Sheriff said. "Our horses is purty well blowed, an' them fellers are always well mounted."

"Well, at least let's give 'em a chase," Boyce cried irritably.

"There ain't no use. Besides, it's too dark. We might run into an ambush ourselves," the officer refused.

"But if you know who those fellows are, why don't you arrest 'em?" Boyce demanded, beginning to feel anger toward the listless officer.

"Hell, I don't know who they are," Colton said. "They're outlaws from Plummer's Hole, I reckon. That's the disadvantage of livin' in this country. Them fellers come up here through Mormon Gap, make a raid an' are back again before we can do anything about it. An' once they git in the gap, you know a couple of 'em can hold off an army."

"Then why not go into this Plummer's Hole after 'em?" Boyce insisted.

Several men laughed. "You're a stranger in this country, fellow, or you wouldn't ask that kind of a fool question. Nobody fools with the outlaws in Plummer's Hole. We've found it better to feed 'em than tuh fight 'em, as Brigham Young used to say about the Injuns," the Sheriff stated.

But Boyce failed to see any joke. "I don't take any stock in that yarn at all," he declared. "These men were not from Plummer's Hole. They live right here in this county."

"You mentioned the Bidwell gang," the Sheriff said. "Just what did yuh mean by that? We all know the Bidwells are worthless and ornery, but they ain't got no gang that anybody knows of."

"Haven't they? Well, I caught one Bidwell stealin' colts as you know, because you've got him locked in your jail. Two more of them scattered poisoned oats on the range to kill Clawhammer cattle, and then those same two and a man who was workin' here tricked me into a cabin over in those rough hills yonder an' held me prisoner till I got away to-day. This bunch followed me from there. And that ain't all the outrages they've been guilty of by any means," Boyce argued hotly.

"Well, that sounds serious, if true," the Sheriff allowed.

"If true? Do you think I'm lyin'——"

"Now, take it easy. Your sister told me you'd been kidnaped, but I figured it was just a cow-puncher joke. If all these things are true, I'll git to the bottom of 'em," the Sheriff soothed.

Boyce didn't like the Sheriff's attitude, but mention of his sister caused him to forget other matters. "You say you saw my sister? Was she all right?" he asked eagerly.

"Fine-lookin' gal," the Sheriff said heartily.

"But you wouldn't believe her when she said I was in trouble. Lord, but she must have worried," Boyce said, his disgust with the officer rising again.

"See here, Boyce, you ain't got no call to criticize me," the Sheriff said angrily. "You'd have been in a pretty dammed hot kettle o' water if we hadn't come along, accordin' to your own story."

"I admit that, an' I'm grateful," Boyce said. "At the same time, I've endured plenty from these Bidwells to raise my ire. If you don't do something about it I intend to."

"Well, swear out complaints an' I'll try tuh serve the warrants. But this business here don't look like Bidwell work to me. At that Hank an' Quall couldn't have been only two of 'em, an' I happen tuh know that Quall got shot——"

"Yeah, I happen tuh know that too," Boyce interrupted grimly. "I shot him."

"You—what? I don't savvy this business. Ina Bidwell come to me this afternoon an' told me that a bunch of rustlers from Plummer's Hole was raisin' Cain over here an' had wounded Quall. I come over here an' find the rustlers all right, but you say you shot Quall. That would make you one of the Plummer's Hole gang if Ina told the truth."

"The Bidwell girl sent you over here?" Boyce gasped.

"She sure enough did. If she hadn't told me that Quall had been shot an' offered to prove it by Doc Watts we wouldn't have been here," the Sheriff declared.

Boyce had nothing to say. He couldn't doubt the Sheriff's statement, and it meant that Ina Bidwell had saved his life. But she had also lied in doing it. She must have known that her brother's friends intended to kill him, and she had circumvented it by telling the Sheriff about a fictitious band of outlaws.

Why she had done it he could not comprehend, for she was his sworn enemy, and everything indicated that her people were determined to kill him and finish their loot of the Clawhammer. Her brother Roy had deliberately tried to murder him the morning the colts were stolen.

It put him in a perplexed state of mind, but his resolution to punish the Bidwells to the full extent of the law never wavered.

X

BOYCE BEGINS BUSINESS

THE grim, hard-faced foreman of the Clawhammer was a changed man when he met his sister in her room at the hotel. All his life Ed Boyce had had to fight his way, and he had learned to bestow his trust upon few, and always to be prepared to fight his own battles. It had given him a hard expression which really did injustice to his natural kindness of heart.

In the presence of Ellen, all the tenderness of his nature came out; the hard lines disappeared, and his eyes beamed with pride and affection. Their parents had died when Ed was fourteen and Ellen six, and they had no other relatives. Even then he had worshipped his little sister, and he had assumed full responsibility for her. From that time on he had done a man's work. He had fed and clothed Ellen, and given her a good education. To the girl's credit she appreciated fully what he had done for her.

With a little cry of pleasure, which also expressed infinite relief, the girl ran across the room and threw her arms around his neck. He bent and kissed her tenderly.

"Ed, you don't know how pleased I am to see you again," she murmured.

"It's been over a year since we seen each other, ain't it? An' you git better lookin' all the time."

"When I got out to the ranch and found you weren't there, I was terribly worried," she said. "They told me you were away on a round-up some place, so I didn't worry much till the Dixon boys came and Ina told me that you had been abducted. Then the suspense was terrible."

"That girl!" For a moment the hard lines in his face reappeared. "Anyway, it made me so mad when I read that she was with you that I done up her two crooked brothers and escaped."

"But, Ed, I can't believe she's a bad girl. She told me the truth to keep the Dixon boys from going where they said you were because she feared they would be killed. And she had a grievance against you because you'd had her brother arrested when he was innocent."

"Innocent? Not a chance, Sis. He not only tried to steal from me but he tried to murder me. I didn't charge him with attempted murder as I should have done."

"But somehow I feel that Ina is clean," Ellen insisted. "Even if her people are crooks she may be all right."

"Anyway, she seems willin' to stop short of murder," Ed conceded. "But let's don't talk about it. I'm awfully glad to see you, but I wish now I hadn't sent for you. You can't stay."

"Can't stay? I'd like to know why not?"

"Because there's too much danger. That outfit has tried to murder me, an' I can't have you putting yourself in danger."

"I'd like to see you stop me," Ellen declared firmly. "You're in danger, but I'm going to share it with you. You can't send me home because I won't go. When you go back to the ranch I'm going with you."

"But, Ellen——"

"Don't argue. Besides, I'll be all right. The Dixon boys will be there now. And if you don't mind, I'm going to ask Ina Bidwell to stay with me."

"That girl? I do mind. I won't have her around where she can have a chance to do you an injury." He flushed guiltily as he saw Ellen looking at him with a quizzical smile. But it caused Ellen considerable thought later.

Ellen had ever had her way with her brother, and he was reluctantly forced to consent to her returning to the ranch. Fortunately, she did not insist upon getting the Bidwell girl, so he was spared defeat upon that point. He made inquiries around the town for a female companion for her but without success. One man promised that his wife would "accept a situation" upon her return from a visit a week hence, but that was the best he could do.

He sent the Dixon twins out to the ranch with an admonition of caution, but as he intended to take Ellen out in the car he expected to get there first. Before leaving, he went down to the courthouse and swore out complaints charging Hank and Quall Bidwell, and Skelly with the crime of kidnaping. The Sheriff promised to arrest the men, but professed his doubts that they could be convicted.

Boyce entertained doubts about the other two men who had been on the Clawhammer ranch, Weeks and Parmer. True, Weeks was supposed to have been kidnaped at the same time he was, but he was unable to see why it should have been necessary to separate them. However, he urged the Sheriff to make a search for Weeks. As for Parmer, he felt that the chances were the young fellow was in with the Bidwells, but he had no direct proof, and Parmer had been a bit aloof from the others. Anyway, the fellow had apparently deserted the ranch.

As he walked back to the hotel from the courthouse, he encountered George Weeks. The fellow grinned and came toward him with his hand outstretched.

"By hunky, boss, I'm glad tuh see you," he said. "I sure been worried about you."

"How did you git away—an' when?" Boyce asked.

"Well, when you can't whip 'em, join 'em, is my motter," the man laughed. "So I joined 'em."

Boyce didn't smile. "How do you mean?"

Weeks looked irritated. Apparently this fellow didn't have any sense of humor. "Why, when they took me down into Plummer's Hole, I realized that my only chance tuh git away was tuh tell 'em that my lifelong ambition was tuh become an outlaw. Finally I made 'em believe it, an' they turned me loose. An' yesterday I got a chance tuh slip away an' come back."

"You were in Plummer's Hole?"

"Yeah, of course."

"Wonder why they didn't take me there?" Boyce queried.

"I dunno, but I kinda reckon yore case was a private grudge the Bidwells had against you. They just wanted tuh get me outa the road."

"What are you goin' to do now?"

"Well, I hoped I could git my job back."

"I suppose you can. But I'll expect you to tell me all you know, an' then help me round up all those crooks."

"Glad to, but I don't know much. It took me all of a heap when I found Skelly was a traitor. I wasn't much surprised at the Bidwells."

"Who were the others?"

"All strangers to me. Plummer's Hole is just an outlaw rendezvous. I reckon Skelly belonged tuh that bunch an' he worked them Bidwells into joinin'. They ain't much good anyway, the Bidwells."

"I share that opinion," Boyce said grimly. "Well, get out to the ranch as quick as you can. I'll need all the men I can get."

"Thanks, boss. And if yuh need some more good men I know where there's two fine fellers you can git—expert cow handlers both."

"All right, bring 'em along," Boyce said after a moment's thought. He needed men badly, and if he was going to trust Weeks he had just as well trust Weeks's friends—some.

The man promised to have the men at the Clawhammer before night, and Boyce went on to the hotel.

"Before we leave town, Ed, I want you to go with me to the jail to see that young Bidwell boy," Ellen said. "Ina convinced me that he was innocent—that somebody else must have stolen those colts and shot at you. I promised her that you'd investigate and withdraw the charge."

"Why investigate if I've got to withdraw the charge?" he smiled. "I'm sorry, Ellen, but this is one thing I can't do—even for you. If he'd just took a shot at me I might overlook it. But he stole Clawhammer property. That's different. This job is a sort of trust, you know. It's the owner's property he got away, and not mine. I was sent here largely tuh stop the stealin' that must have been goin' on. Could I turn loose the first crook I catch on account of a girl?"

"I—I—suppose not," Ellen admitted ruefully.

At last, however, they started for the ranch. A couple of miles out of town they came upon a solitary figure trudging toward town, with a bundle on the end of a stick.

"More hard luck," Ed said with a grin, "here comes our cook."

It was indeed Hung Fat. The Oriental stepped to the side of the road, but didn't stop until Ed stopped his car and called to him.

"Hung Fat. Where you goin'?"

"Gloo to town."

"But don't you want a job?"

"Lost no job—plentee glad job all walk off."

"But we're going back, an' we'll need a cook," Boyce protested. "Climb in the back an' go with us."

"Too much shootee—cook once and lun twice."

"I hollered at you when I left last night, but I couldn't find you. Where were you?

"Shootin' stlat an' Hun Fat lun like helle—flall in ditch," the Chinaman said. They noticed then that his clothes were covered with dried mud. But after much persuasion, and the promise of a raise in wages, the Chinaman climbed into the car and returned to the Clawhammer with them.

When at last they reached the ranch they were behind the Dixon twins. As they drove up they saw three saddled horses standing in the yard. The third one they discovered quickly belonged to Babe Bidwell. Babe was standing against the side of a stable with his hands in the air, and a bewildered look upon his great, vacant face. A few feet away stood the Dixon twins with their hands upon their guns.

"Jest ketched this bird goin' through the house," Dan explained. "Saw yore dust comin' so we waited before we cut off his ears."

"I didn't do nothin'," Babe protested.

"What business had you sneakin' through the house?" Dan demanded.

"I just rode by. I didn't see nobody, so I went in," Babe said in a tone which implied that that was full explanation.

"Didn't see anybody so you went to see what you could steal, huh?" Dan barked. He turned and winked toward Ed and Ellen. Anybody could tell that Babe's mind was sadly defective, though the men at least believed that theft had been his purpose in invading the house. In this they were wrong. He had been actuated only by a childish curiosity.

"What say we just clip the ends off his ears an' let him go?" Dan murmured.

Babe's fear was ghastly. His folks had never allowed him to have a gun, and as a consequence he had developed a morbid dread of one. Finding himself covered by two guns had thrown him into state of quivering terror, and what Dan Dixon said did not lessen his fright. He began to blubber like a child.

Ellen was out of the car instantly. "Dan Dixon, you put up that gun!" she ordered crisply. "You, too, Don. You ought to be ashamed of yourself scaring a boy like that. Can't you see that he's—that he's sub-normal?"

She placed herself between Babe and the mischievous twins, and touched Babe's arm soothingly. "Never you mind," she consoled. "You're not going to be hurt. They were just joking. You go on home now."

Babe's baby blue eyes rested upon her first questioningly, and then with adoration. "I wasn't gonna steal," he asserted.

"Of course you weren't," she said earnestly.

"Just one minute, Ellen," Ed put in. "This fellow isn't as harmless as you think, as I happen to know. His name is Bidwell, an' he came closer to givin' me a lickin' than anybody has come in ten years. I don't hold that against him, but he's got no business on this place, and I don't put as much faith in his denials as you do."

"Ed, don't be so suspicious of everybody," Ellen protested. "You can't do anything to a—a—boy like this anyway."

"I don't intend to, but I do intend to send a warning to his people. Make him wait here," he said to the Dixons, "until I write a note."

He went inside, and while Ellen boldly looked over his shoulder, he wrote:

> Mr. Bidwell:
>
> My men just caught the bearer of this note going through the ranch house here while everybody was away. So far as I know, he hadn't had time to steal anything or do other damage, but if you value his safety, you'll keep him away from this place in the future. And this holds for the rest of your family.
>
> Yours truly,
> Ed. Boyce.

"I wouldn't send that if I were you, Ed," Ellen said gently.

Ed placed his hands upon her shoulders and looked fondly into her eyes. "I know it looks tough to be fightin' a half-wit and a girl, but the situation is too serious to compromise," he assured her.

"I'm afraid it's a mistake, Ed," she said, but dropped the argument. The note was given to Babe and he was advised to give it to his father.

Boyce had little time to give to his sister. Things were in a bad way at the ranch. Not only had the pure-bred Percherons disappeared, but even the saddle and work horses of the outfit had vanished. What had happened to the cattle upon the range he could only conjecture. The Dixons were mounted upon horses they had hired from a livery stable in Daggett and Ed was afoot. The first thing to do was to get some saddle horses, and then they had to find out what had happened to the stock on the range.

He sent Dan and Don out to look for horses that afternoon, while he busied himself about the place, where there was plenty to do. He had to recognize the fact that another attempt might be made upon his life at any time. To give Ellen a chance to get away at a moment's notice he drove the ranch car around by the back door and opened a gap in the fence so that the road could be reached without stopping. If anything happened, he instructed her to make use of this means to get to town as quickly as possible. He had bought a rifle and a .38 revolver before leaving

Daggett. The rifle he placed for the present in his room and the six-shooter he gave to the girl.

"You know how to shoot, so don't hesitate to use it if you have to," he said. "If you will stay here, you'll be alone much of the time."

"Why can't I ride with you?" she demanded.

"You couldn't stand the gaff, Sis. As soon as I get some horses, I've just got to ride the tails off 'em. You'll have tuh stick here mostly, unless you want to go to town."

"I'm not going to town," she said with an air of finality.

Late in the afternoon the Dixons fogged in a bunch of twenty saddle horses.

"Found 'em at a cow camp about fifteen miles from here, and as they all had their rumps decorated with the print of a clawhammer we decided tuh bring 'em in," Dan informed.

"Wasn't there anybody at the camp?" Boyce queried.

"Yes, there was three hombres there. One of 'em said he was workin' for you, an' the other two said they were just visitin'."

"Tell you their names?"

"Oh, yeah. We insisted strong on it as a point of etiquette," Dan grinned. "The one who clings to the pay roll is named Jack Parmer. He was the fellow who offered some slight objection to Miss Ellen usin' the car the other day. Kinda faint-hearted objection it was, so we didn't remind him of it only casual to-day. The other two said their names was Highhorse——"

"House," Dan corrected succinctly.

"Yeah, Highhouse—any way I knew they were up in the air. One was called Jake, the other Cal. Kinda mean, measly-lookin' specimens, I thought. Said they run cattle in the Highhouse hills, which is that dee-strict over yander." He pointed toward the rough hills in which Boyce had recently been held a prisoner.

"I see. The former foreman here was named Highhouse—Brig was his name," Ed said.

"Yes; they said they was younger brothers of his."

"You didn't have any trouble with them?"

"None to speak of. Parmer claimed he didn't know anything about what had happened here, an' said after Skelly left that he went out to the camp, an' was doin' what ridin' he could."

"Did you see many cattle?"

"Some. But most that we saw seemed tuh belong to these here Highhouses."

"We've got to git busy at once and round up our stuff," Boyce declared. "I've got three more men comin' to-night. We'll keep Parmer, an' we'll see if these Highhouses want to join us."

A little later George Weeks reached the ranch with the two men he had promised. Weeks was a man of middle age, and the two men he brought were scarcely past twenty. They were straight, supple young fellows, bow-legged of course, and light of complexion and hair. But there was a certain marble hardness about them, a distinct coldness of eye, which Boyce did not like and the Dixons regarded the new men with much disfavor, which they didn't hesitate to express to Boyce.

"It's not much of our business, Ed, but that guy Weeks looks like he'd orta been hung years ago just on general looks, but we're gamblin' that he's a perfect little angel compared tuh them two hombres he brung with him," Dan said vigorously.

"It does seem a bit queer that a man of Weeks's age should pal around with young bucks like them," Boyce agreed. "It looks to me like we might have to watch our whole crew pretty close."

"Them two will be watched," Dan said grimly. "Already they're assumin' that they're better riders an' know more tricks than anybody around here."

Boyce smiled quietly to himself. The Dixon twins were proud of their ability, and if these two strangers undertook to show them up there would be some interesting doings. At the same time, he didn't like the looks of the two new men, who gave their names as Charley Groat and "Whitey" Mason. They denied relationship with each other when Boyce casually mentioned a certain likeness, but the likeness, though not pronounced, was visible, and they had betrayed some irritation at the mention of it. If they were not brothers, then Boyce silently admitted that he was badly mistaken. And if they were brothers then at least one of them went under an assumed name. Somehow he could not think of them without thinking of Plummer's Hole, named after a long-dead outlaw chieftain, and the outlaws who were still said to abound there. But he needed men.

The Clawhammer had owned plenty of saddle horses, and Weeks assured Boyce that he knew where most of them ranged. He promised that by noon the next day he and his two friends would have all the horses they wanted at the cow camp, where the round-up was to start. Weeks also undertook to ask the Highhouses to coöperate.

The prospect of getting down to work gave Boyce much satisfaction. His chief worry was about Ellen. Until he could get a woman to stay with her, he would have to ride back to the ranch every night, no matter where the rodeo might be. He didn't mind that, except that he knew he must come and go in the dark and he dreaded the hours when Ellen would be left alone with nobody but the Chinese cook.

The next morning he was so busy with preparations for the coming round-up that he had almost forgotten the Bidwells, and the affair of Babe Bidwell had slipped his mind altogether.

It was brought forcibly to his mind when he looked up and beheld Ina Bidwell flinging herself from the familiar calico horse. She advanced straight toward him, her blue-gray eyes now almost green with ill suppressed rage. There was a piece of paper in her hand.

"Did you write this?" she demanded. He saw that it was the note he had sent to Luther Bidwell by Babe.

XI

A SWARM OF BULLETS

Ina Bidwell had gone home to try to forget Ed Boyce. She knew he had been rescued by the Sheriff, and she felt that she had done all that could be required of her from an enemy. She knew he would try to have Hank and Quall arrested, and she quietly determined to see that he failed. As for Roy, her heart felt leaden whenever she thought of him. Boyce's determined attitude clearly showed that she would expect no mercy from him. Roy's only chance lay in the conspiracy of the Highhouses going through. She told herself fiercely that no word of warning would he ever get from her unless he did justice to Roy.

She had made good her promise to Quall to take supplies to him and Hank in an old, abandoned miner's cabin which had so grown over with rank brush and saplings that it was utterly concealed from sight until one was right upon it. She had made up a pack at her father's house, and left with it before any one was up. She was far into the hills before daybreak.

Neither Hank nor Quall had been at the cabin, and she was thoroughly disgusted with them. It would be like them, she thought, to hang around with the Highhouses until the Sheriff came. However, she left her supplies, and an unsigned note telling them that she would return in three days.

On her way back she detoured from the way home to ride over a portion of the Clawhammer cattle range. It was all familiar to her, for she had been as much at home on a horse as her brothers, and had explored every portion of the range. The thing that impressed her at once was the scarcity of cattle on the north end of the range. She encountered more as she proceeded south, but at the extreme south end of the range lay a high mountain range with lofty minarets of solid granite and broken in just one place by the knife-blade cañon known as Mormon Gap.

Ina formed her own conclusions, based upon a sure knowledge of the country. Everything indicated that the Clawhammer cattle were being drifted incessantly toward Mormon Gap. Naturally, a number of the old cows with their calves pulled back toward their favorite range, but the great majority had been worked southward.

It was not a round-up, for the people responsible evidently did not care about getting everything, but she could see that the cattle were being worked to a place where a swift round-up could be held and close to Mormon Gap.

Even in that outlaw stronghold she had never heard of a whole herd of cattle being stolen at once. A slow trickle of little bunches from ten to a hundred head in size had sufficed to keep the outlaws prosperous and the officers helpless. Was it possible, she wondered, that they were planning one grand coup while the new foreman of the Clawhammer was occupied in trying to send the Bidwells to prison?

"I could tell him things," she murmured as she rode home.

When she got home, after dark, her father complainingly showed her the note Babe had brought home. With fiery indignation, she resolved that she would tell that man Boyce something, and it would not be the things she had learned on the range that day.

She interviewed Babe, and when she found that they had held him up with guns her anger fairly overflowed. Babe, she knew, had meant no harm.

The nearer she got to the Clawhammer ranch the next morning the more her anger increased. She recalled that she, too, as a Bidwell, had been ordered to stay off the place.

"Yes, I think I wrote that," Boyce said, when he recovered from his surprise. "Your brother was caught——"

"I don't care where he was, he wasn't stealing. What makes you think that the only way people can live in this country is by stealing from you? It's a free country, and I'm going to tell you that you can't tell me where I can go an' where not."

"I can," Boyce said bluntly. "I can tell you to go to——" He bit his lip to cut off the final word, and turned to her beseechingly. "Look here; I can't fight with a girl. I don't want to hurt you or your unfortunate brother. I let him go when anybody else would have done something about it, if they'd found him prowlin' through their house when there was nobody home. Why can't you lay off?"

"You want me to lay off you and your affairs, do you?" Ina asked coldly.

"I don't ask anything more," he said heartily.

"All right. You can get into just as much trouble as you like and I won't turn a hand to help you," she said bitterly.

"I really wasn't expecting it," he said sardonically.

"But it's my affair to keep you from sending my brothers to the penitentiary," she retorted. "And I'm going to do it."

"You're much more likely to end in the same place yourself."

Ellen suddenly appeared on the scene. "Why, hello, Ina," she greeted. "Why didn't you come up to the house?"

"Your brother would have thought I was trying to steal something," Ina shot back.

"Ed, you're not quarreling with my friend?" Ellen reproved.

"I don't know what it is," he said helplessly. "God knows I don't want to quarrel with her, but every place I turn I bump into a Bidwell."

"Well, you'll bump into somebody else soon enough," she retorted and started back to her horse.

Ellen followed the girl. "I'm sorry you and Ed don't seem to get along," she said. "He's really a fine man.

But it means a lot for him to make good here, and he thinks he has good reasons for what he does."

Ina said nothing. As usual she found herself unable to combat the other girl. Somehow Ellen always made her see the other side of things. Boyce did have good reasons for his hatred of her family. The criminal acts of Hank and Quall were more than enough to confirm his suspicion of the motives of the other members of the family.

"I'm going to be alone here much of the time," Ellen continued. "I wish I could see you occasionally."

"I was ordered to stay away."

Ellen smiled. "Don't take that order very seriously, but if you don't want to come here, won't you let me come to see you?"

A warm feeling stole over Ina Bidwell. She did want to be friends with Ellen Boyce, despite the girl's brother. But she realized instantly that she could never invite this refined girl to the deplorable cabin on Grizzly Creek.

"No," she said shortly, "I don't want you to come there." She got on her horse and rode away.

"Well, Ellen, it looks like you'd been snubbed," Ed grinned.

"I don't care. Some day I'm going to win that girl's confidence," Ellen declared.

Three days later Ina again rode up to the cabin on Skunk Creek, and this time she found her brothers located there. Hank's face was still somewhat of a mess, and Quall carried his arm in a sling. They accepted the supplies she brought them without a word of thanks.

"We want you to ride over tuh Brig Highhouse's an' tell him that we can't stay here an' do nothin'. If he can't keep the Sheriff off us, we want him tuh fix it for us tuh go tuh Plummer's Hole till this blows over," Quall said.

"You'd better stay right here," Ina said. "The Sheriff or one of his deputies has been hangin' around every day."

"We're not goin' tuh stay here," Quall said. "Brig could fix things for us with Joe Dice——"

"Joe Dice! Who's he?"

"Where've you had your ears locked up? Joe Dice is the leader in Plummer's Hole. Even Brig has tuh take orders from him."

"Tell me about him," she urged.

Quall bent a suspicious glance upon her. "Wimmin can't be trusted much," he declared.

"I suppose I couldn't have told the Sheriff where you were," she snapped.

"Oh, yo're all right," Hank said. "But this is a man's game. You wouldn't understand it."

"I know that this man Boyce has got to be drove out of here so that Brig Highhouse can get to running the Clawhammer again if a lot of criminals are to be safe," she said.

"He will be drove out or he'll be killed," Quall snarled. "He took us by surprise, or he'd never got away."

"What are they goin' to do now?" Ina asked casually. It was not often that her half brothers would deign to discuss anything with her, but their enforced imprisonment in the old cabin had made them talkative. If they knew anything she felt it would be advisable to find it out.

"We wanta know ourselves," Hank said. "The original idee was tuh hold him an' make it appear that he was responsible for the losses. The Clawhammer stuff was tuh be recovered from Plummer's Hole by Brig's crowd so Brig would git the credit an' git the job back."

"But if they want to steal the Clawhammer stuff, why don't they just do it?" Ina demanded.

"I told yuh, yuh wouldn't understand," Hank said. "Don't you see that this country is right on the outlaw trail? For years Joe Dice an' his men have run stock through here because him an' Brig have had an understandin'. They've pulled other kinds o' jobs, too, an' had a safe country tuh go through. An' if the officers got after 'em in there, they could hit out through Mormon Gap an' hide there."

"But what did Highhouse git out of it?" Ina asked.

"He got his whack," Hank grinned. "Besides that, when he wanted tuh sell a few Clawhammer stock on his own account, he could sell 'em to Joe Dice."

This was not entirely new to Ina, for she had known for years that the Highhouses were thieves. She perceived now why the looting had been limited.

"If some other outfit gits control here, they could watch Mormon Gap, an' Plummer's Hole wouldn't be no safer than any other place," Quall opined.

"Sure. That's why Dice is as interested as Brig. An' if Dice goes after this feller he'll soon git him," Hank said. "But the point is, they want tuh frame him so Brig'll git the job back. If they kill him, they might send somebody else in an' it'd all have tuh be done over."

"But he claims somebody tried to kill him when those colts were stolen. What about that?" Ina asked eagerly.

"That's something that's had even Brig stumped. None of the Highhouses done that. Right now Brig don't know who tried to swipe them colts."

"Then who cut that stallion's throat?" Ina queried.

"I did," Quall boasted, "tuh even up fer that poke in the neck."

Ina was sickened with the whole sorry business. Hank and Quall she knew had not a semblance of honor. Save for the fact that she was determined to thwart Ed Boyce in his efforts, she would have been willing to see them go to prison. But she could not doubt that they were telling her the truth about the colts. If an outsider had stolen them, then there was no chance ever to clear Roy except to make it impossible for Boyce to appear against him.

There were things which she still did not know. Outlawry had a glamour for Hank and Quall because of the huge profits of crime which they thought the big men like Joe Dice made. And they would have given much to have their names in men's mouths as notorious bandits. They thought Dice must be one of the richest and happiest men in the world. All of which was far from the truth.

The outlaws in Plummer's Hole were successful in avoiding capture, but they were in hiding too much to be able to make any huge profits. They had to depend upon the Highhouses for a measure of safety, and there was a limit beyond which Highhouse dared not step. All these things kept the leaders, such as Dice and Highhouse in constant uncertainty and more or less in a state of nervous desperation, but of this the hangers-on like Hank and Quall did not know. Much less did they guess of the jealousy that existed between Joe Dice and Brig Highhouse, as each one felt that the other was always trying to get the better of him.

"Now you hustle on over an' tell Brig what we told yuh," Hank ordered.

"I will not," she refused bluntly. "I'll keep still about your dirty tricks, but I won't help you with 'em. I'll help you dodge the Sheriff as long as you stay here, but that's all I will do."

"By Gawd, I've a notion tuh knock yore block off," Quall bawled.

"You quit doin' that some time ago. If you want to keep your health, you'll let it stop where it did," she said, backing toward the door, and laying her hand on the butt of Roy's gun, which she wore at her waist.

They glowered at her as she mounted her horse, but they knew better than to molest her just then.

As she rode back, she again veered over toward the Clawhammer range; not, this time, to see what had happened to the cattle, but to reach a point where she could look over the Clawhammer ranch buildings. She would not go there for a fortune after what had happened, but she was drawn to the place like a magnet.

There was a high, rocky ridge about two miles distant from the ranch which commanded a good view. On the side nearest the ranch it was bare and rocky like the top, but the other side was criss-crossed with draws and was heavily timbered. This made it easy for her to get to the top unseen.

She was riding up a draw, and was almost to the top when she came abruptly upon four saddled horses standing in a huddle where they had been left by their riders. Her own horse started to nicker, but she stopped him with a jerk, and turned swiftly back until she knew she was out of sight. To make doubly sure of safety, she put another wooded gulch between her and the horses.

But by this time, she was wondering who the men were, and what they were doing there. It occurred to her that they must have been intent upon the same thing that she was contemplating. She recalled that Ellen Boyce had said that she would be much alone at the ranch, and it brought a gasp of fear to her lips.

She had to know what these men were up to. She tied her horse, and jerking a hair from his tail she tied it around his nose to suppress any inclination he might have to nicker. He would be kept plenty busy crinkling his nose in an attempt to dislodge the irritating hair to bother about making a noise. Then her hand upon her gun, she darted through the timber with the swift grace of a frightened fawn.

She dared not try to approach the top of the ridge, so her best chance was to get as close to their horses as she could and wait for the men to come back. She saw a thick tangle of brush not far from the horses and made for it. Stealthy as she was the horses observed her, and their ears went up. Had their riders been present then, she knew there would have been an investigation.

She reached her objective, however, and found the brush afforded reasonably good shelter. She waited a few moments to compose herself, and discovered that the horses were paying little attention to her.

The thick brush continued up to within a rod of where the horses stood, and she found herself wondering if she dared to get close enough to hear what the men said when they came back. The temptation could not be resisted. She crept through the brush until she was within two rods of the horses, but their actions as they watched her, uncertain of what she was, warned her that she had better go back.

Too late! The four men were already returning, and she dared not move. She crouched down where she was. A less self-controlled girl would have tried to run away and would almost certainly have been caught.

Fortunately for her, the attention of the horses was for the moment distracted from her to the approaching men. But soon after they again began to peer in her direction, and one young, half-broken horse, manifested a disposition to snort occasionally. Ina felt like shooting him.

She at once recognized the man Skelly, who came near being her pet aversion. With him was a stranger, but she remembered to have seen him at the Clawhammer ranch the morning she had gone over there to read Boyce the riot act about Babe. She liked his looks even less than Skelly's. Behind them came George Weeks, and the stranger she had seen with Brig Highhouse and Skelly the day she had overheard them at the spring. Like a flash, it dawned upon her that this stern-looking fellow must be the powerful Joe Dice whom she had just heard Hank and Quall discussing.

"It looks easy, but it's not as easy as it looks," George Weeks was saying. "They can see anybody comin' in the daytime, an' at night that damned Boyce is home."

"A bullet would fix him," grated the young stranger, who happened to be Whitey Mason.

"You fellows will never git far if you don't use your brains," spoke up the man whom Ina thought was Joe Dice. "If Boyce was dead, how long do yuh think it'd be before somebody else was sent out here to investigate, even if Highhouse is sendin' in his punk reports? We've got tuh keep Boyce alive for the present because we need him."

"Hell of a lot of good he is to us," Skelly said.

"That's just why we've got to get our hands on that sister of his," Dice said. "Once we git her in the Hole, Boyce will be a plumb good little boy. He'll send back any kind of a report we ask him to, an' his reports will be worth a lot more to us than old Brig's will."

"Are yuh aimin' tuh give old Highhouse an empty sack?" Skelly queried.

"I ain't said so, have I?" Dice demanded irritably, but the irrepressible Skelly grinned knowingly.

"It seems to me that Highhouse's idee o' gittin' rich quick is tuh wait till our whiskers reach down to our toenails," Skelly said. "Now, me, I favor a short life an' a merry one."

"Yuh'll probably have a short one all right," Joe Dice said testily.

The men were getting on their horses, and Ina felt secure. But Whitey Mason was riding the half-broken colt that had been so curious about her before. When the man vaulted into the saddle, the colt let out a shrill whistle and whirled away from the brush where the girl crouched.

"What the hell's the matter with you?" the rider snarled, and curbed his mount viciously.

"Sees somethin' in the brush there," George Weeks said.

Mason spun the colt about and made as though to force it into the brush but the animal became wild with terror. The rider spurred it cruelly, and the colt began to buck. Mason was a good horseman and soon had the animal under control.

"Now, damn yuh, I'll ride you up tuh whatever that is an' show yuh it's nothin' to git scared of," he said angrily.

Ina felt that detection was certain, but still she steeled herself to remain perfectly quiet. Mason forced the panicky colt up to within ten feet of her, and only the fact that his attention was upon his mount kept him from seeing her. Then the colt bolted back again despite his efforts.

"Must be a porcupine, Whitey," Weeks said. "Let it go."

"Anyway, if there is something in there I'm gonna bring it out," Mason raged, perhaps to cover his chagrin because he had failed to conquer the horse. He drew his gun and emptied it rapidly into the brush where the girl crouched.

It was either get up and trust herself to the tender mercy of the outlaws, or lie still and pray that none of the bullets would hit her. Ina preferred the danger where she felt she would have at least the element of luck in her favor. When the first bullet crashed through the brush just above her she flattened herself as much as she could, shut her eyes, clinched her fists —and waited.

Every bullet it seemed to her came closer. She felt the fourth one rip a hole in the leg of her riding breeches, and thought that the next one would mean her finish. But the next two were directed elsewhere, and she was safe.

"Aw, the damn fool colt never seen nothin'," Mason said disgustedly, and the whole party rode away.

This had been a far narrower escape for Ina than the other time she had eavesdropped the outlaws, but when they had gone she felt that what she had heard was of relatively more importance.

These men aimed to get a firm grasp on the Clawhammer by kidnaping Ellen Boyce, and making her brother come to their terms. She also believed that they meant in some way to double-cross old Brig Highhouse, but that concerned her little. The important point was how to prevent the contemptible plans of the outlaws from going through.

She did not hesitate a moment about bucking the outlaws' plans. If Ellen Boyce was in danger, she knew that she would do her utmost to save her. Ellen had treated her decently and there was not a particle of ingratitude in the range girl's nature. She was ready to go through hell for anyone who had treated her square.

Just the same the problem presented strange difficulties. She had been ordered to keep off the Clawhammer ranch, and she had refused to let Ellen visit her. She had to get in touch with the other girl someway, however, but she resolved that Ed Boyce should never know she was fighting his enemies.

XII

THE OUTLAWS STRIKE

Ed Boyce's round-up was proceeding, seemingly, without a hitch. He and the Dixon twins had scouted the range beforehand to get an idea of how it should be conducted. There was no doubt that the cattle were mostly on the south end of the range, and that end bordered a rough country next to the mountain range pierced by Mormon Gap. This was enough to cause the foreman some uneasiness, and it gave the round-up a triple purpose. Ostensibly, it was being conducted to get the unmarked calves, but the primary purpose with Boyce was to get a count of all the stock on the range, because since there had really been no sale, the exact number of cattle was still unknown, and now it became almost as important to move the stuff back from the dangerous territory bordering the infamous Plummer's Hole.

It was a little over twenty miles from the Clawhammer ranch to the south end of the range. There was a ten-mile strip of waste land between that and the Mormon Gap that was in general too barren and rocky for stock. The Clawhammer had always maintained a camp near this border for the ostensible purpose of watching this outlaw trail, but it had been abandoned when the outfit changed hands, and Boyce had not yet had time to restore it. Boyce wanted to start the round-up at this side and work everything back toward the ranch, but to this he encountered two objections. As yet he dared not leave Ellen alone overnight, and this meant a twenty-mile ride for him night and morning. Since a round-up must begin at daybreak and continue until dark it allowed him little time for rest.

The other reason concerned his neighbors, the Highhouses. Boyce had gone into their country, which lay just to the west of the Clawhammer range, and which was known as the Highhouse hills, to see them. None of them owned many cattle, it seemed, and they ran them in a sort of coöperative fashion. Jake and Cal, the two men the Dixons had seen with Jack Parmer, were the regular riders. When Boyce called at their camp and asked them if they would join the round-up they agreed eagerly, and promised to have a force of extra men. But later they rode over to the Clawhammer camp in company with Brig Highhouse and his son Ace to tell Boyce that the round-up should begin in the Highhouse hills, and work through to the eastern boundary of the Clawhammer range.

Boyce didn't like the looks of any of the Highhouses, and his gaze lingered for a long time upon the athletic figure of Ace Highhouse. He had, of course, met Brig when he first came to take possession of the property for the new owners, but Brig had been sulky, and had left the ranch immediately. At that the son's face seemed more familiar. Just where he had seen him Boyce didn't know. It might have been when he was besieged at the Clawhammer, but he recalled that he had not noticed anyone in particular except the man with the long beard.

Then something made him think of the man who had come with Ellen's letter to the cabin where he was imprisoned. He had seen only the fellow's chapped legs and a portion of his body, but what he had seen bore a remarkable resemblance to young Highhouse. Whoever the fellow was, he had tried earnestly to kill Boyce and the latter had returned the compliment.

It gave Boyce something to think about. If this was the fellow, then it linked the Bidwells with the Highhouses instead of with the outlaws in Plummer's Hole as he had thought. The attitude of Ace was nonchalant, and more than a little cocky. Old Brig himself was inclined to be surly and overbearing.

"You can suit yourself, but I won't have anything tuh do with it unless we start in our range," Brig said arrogantly. "For one thing I've run cattle here for years, an' I know it's the logical way tuh run a roundup. But the main thing is, I want it clear an' understood that we ain't tryin' tuh get away with any of your stuff. When we sweep our range clean, you'll know that we ain't been hidin' anything out on yuh."

Boyce was far from liking the man's tone, yet he recognized that some courtesy was due Highhouse as a former foreman. If he went ahead and ordered the round-up conducted in a different way, it would look to be a personal reflection upon the man's judgment. Then, too, he did need the extra men and horses badly, and if possible he wanted to keep their good will until he knew them to be enemies.

"I'll defer to your judgment in this instance," he said mildly. "And since it is to be a joint affair I'm willing for you to take charge."

He saw an exchange of satisfied looks between the younger Highhouses, but after all it was not so much of a concession as it seemed. He could change the arrangement any time he wished, but it allowed him to be free from the routine of conducting circles and cutting out. The Dixon boys would be on hand to see that there was no laxity about the gathering and cutting out, and it would allow Boyce himself a free hand. He could ride where he wanted to, and it would give him time to ride to and from the ranch.

He was not forgetting that three attempts had been made upon his life and he was constantly alert. His dislike for and suspicion of Ace Highhouse had a tendency to make him more than usually watchful, especially while in the Highhouse country. Other Highhouses appeared as extra riders, but the only one of special notice was a young fellow about Ace's age called Folland, who walked with a slight limp and was decidedly evil in appearance. If Ace was a wolf, and he looked the part, Folland was a coyote. Boyce warned the Dixons that he would bear watching.

Once the whoop-up was under way it went with a bang, and it took only three days to cover the Highhouse hills. Each day when the rodeo was gathered in the afternoon Boyce contrived to be present. Few Clawhammer cattle were found, but when they were cut out Boyce had Jack Parmer and Charley Groat drive them over on the Clawhammer range. The Highhouse cattle were turned back.

The day the last rodeo was held in Highhouse country Boyce arrived a little late. There was one man present whom he had not seen before, but the great, brown, spade beard upon his face at once caught Boyce's attention. In imagination he covered the face and the upper part of the beard with a handkerchief, and he knew that the lower part of the beard which would remain in sight was the same that he had noticed the evening he had been chased into the Clawhammer.

"Who's the fellow with the doormat on his chest?" he asked Jack Parmer.

"That? Why, that's old Ock Highhouse, a brother to Brig. They do say he's the meanest of 'em all, unless it's his son, Folland," Parmer replied.

"Shouldn't be surprised," Boyce answered, and rode away.

There could be no question that he was surrounded by enemies. If two of the Highhouses had tried to murder him, then they were all his foes, for their clannishness could not be mistaken. Yet there was nothing he could do about it just now. They would be only too glad, he thought, for him to start something with them. They were nearly a dozen strong altogether, while the only men Boyce could depend upon were the Dixons. The others were just as likely to be in league with the Highhouses as to be neutral. He had to carry on the work as though nothing unusual impended, and watch for the outlaws to show their hands.

That was not long delayed.

The first day the round-up was on the Clawhammer range, everything seemed to go wrong. First, a bunch of saddle horses escaped the horse wranglers, and men had to be sent after them. Then the chuck wagon was overturned, and this delayed everything so that no cattle could be gathered. Finally, there was a mistake about Brig Highhouse's orders, or so the man claimed, and the men were split up on different parts of the range. The Dixon twins came back to camp thoroughly disgusted because some promised help had failed to appear.

To get things going again, Boyce remained until nearly dark, and then he had a twenty-mile ride back to the ranch. He had covered perhaps half the distance, and was riding at a fast trot when his horse suddenly tumbled headlong, and lay kicking in the throes of death. The fall was so unexpected that Boyce had only time to get his feet out of the stirrups. He fell hard, and his head hit the hard ground with a bang. But as he fell, his ears had caught the report of a rifle, and instantly every brain cell was at work with the instinctive urge of combat. This, possibly, was all that kept him from being knocked unconscious. As it was, everything was black, yet blindly he got to his feet and staggered a few yards before his senses fully came back.

Another rifle bullet that flew over his head made him duck. He dropped on his hands and knees and crawled swiftly back to his dying horse. Fortunately, he was able to drag his rifle from the scabbard, and when a third shot revealed the whereabouts of the sniper he returned the compliment.

He was quickly made to realize by the number of shots that buzzed around him that there were at least two or three men against him. He flattened himself on the ground and replied steadily for a few minutes, then crawled away a few yards, shot again and resumed his flight.

He had all he wanted of a siege, it was not far to brush and the country was full of deep coulees. At the end of half an hour he felt he had eluded his enemies. At that he wondered that none of their shots had taken effect. Whoever had killed his horse had made a good shot, but that had been the only good one. He didn't realize, of course, that they wanted him alive.

In the darkness the outlaws couldn't follow him far and it would have been dangerous for them. But his plight was irritating. Here he was ten miles from home and on foot. Nor was it any nearer to camp. By the time he could walk to the ranch it would be midnight. He would be played out, and Ellen would be worried.

He had not had time to be frightened before but now a cold chill swept over him. Suppose he had been killed. What then would have happened to Ellen. Suddenly he realized that the ranch was unsafe, and that he must send her away, despite her protests. Then it occurred to him that the outlaws, finding he had escaped them then, might have gone on to the ranch to wait for him there. If they had Ellen would be at their mercy. Thought of that sent him into a trot, but he had the good sense to realize that he could not hope to beat horses there, and undue haste would only weaken him for what he might have to do when he arrived.

Nevertheless it was hard to keep from walking so fast that he would get out of breath. When he became winded he would rest a moment, and then start out at a slow pace, which would increase unconsciously until it all had to be done over again. The rifle impeded his progress, and soon he hid it in a bush where it could be found again, and then he made better time.

He was not far wrong in his estimate of the time it would take him to reach the ranch. His watch showed that it was a quarter of twelve. He approached warily, determined not to run into any more ambushes, but at the same time a stark fear was eating into his brain and bidding him rush madly up to the house.

No light showed from the windows, and he knew that if Ellen was there she would be waiting up for him.

He soon became convinced that there was nobody about the place. He hurried into the house and called Ellen's name while he was fumbling with a lamp. No reply.

With the most agonizing feeling he had ever known, he dashed from room to room. No trace of Ellen!

"Hung Fat! Hung Fat!" he shouted wildly.

He hardly hoped for a reply but he searched the loft where he had once found the Chinaman hidden. Hung Fat had disappeared as completely as Ellen.

He thought of the car he had left at the back door as a means for Ellen to escape. The car was gone! This at least gave him some sort of a thread to hitch his hopes to. Ellen and the cook might have managed to make their escape.

More collectedly he reëntered the house and looked around. Unless Ellen had been frightfully pressed for time, she would surely have left a note. There was nothing of the kind in his room or in the living room. But when he entered her room again he glimpsed a sheet of paper upon the bed and clutched it eagerly.

The first glance told him it was not Ellen's handwriting. The letters were clearly formed, but it impressed one as having been made by a person who wrote slowly and with extreme care. Boyce read it avidly.

> DEAR MISS BOYCE:
>
> I simply must see you this afternoon. It's of the greatest importance to you. It don't concern me. Your brother ordered me not to come on the ranch again, so I'm sending you this note by the Sheriff. I don't want you to come to my place either, so I'll meet you at the foot of the hill where the road turns toward Daggett. Be there at three o'clock and I'll be waiting.
>
> Miss Boyce, you simply must not refuse to meet me there. You're in great danger. Please trust me.
>
> Your friend,
> INA BIDWELL.

"Friend? God, what a friend she turned out to be," Boyce ground out bitterly. He sat down upon the edge of the bed and buried his face in his hands. Not for one moment did he doubt that Ellen had fallen into the hands of his foes. He knew that with the trust she had in almost everybody, and especially with her liking for this Bidwell girl, that she would be sure to keep the rendezvous at three o'clock. The place designated was not five miles from the ranch. She had certainly been abducted from that point; otherwise she would have at least have returned to the ranch and left some word explaining her absence.

The Bidwells had struck again, and this time they had chosen the one thing which might cause him to make an abject surrender.

For a long time he sat there with despair gnawing at his heart. To give up he meant disgrace, perhaps dishonor, certainly the loss of his self-respect, for he would have to tell Uncle Tom and the directors of the company that he had failed with his job. Yet all this was but the known cost; what other demands the outlaws might make he could only guess.

At last he rallied from his black despair to plan what he must do first. There was no horse up and he couldn't catch one before daylight. But he was in a quandary about what to do then. He thought of going to Daggett, but he was disgusted with the feeble efforts of the Sheriff to apprehend the Bidwells. And probably the worst thing he could do for Ellen would be to have the officers searching for her. A general alarm might prove fatal. He had to act with the utmost discretion.

Very soon, he felt sure, the bandits would let him know what they wanted. The wisest thing perhaps, he thought, was to wait until they did; but inaction of any kind would drive him mad. He resolved that in the morning he would at least find Ina Bidwell and force the girl to lay her cards upon the table.

XIII

CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE

INA had spent a sleepless night after her close call with the outlaws on the ridge above the Clawhammer. The shock of those bullets hissing about her had been enough to keep her nerves tingling for a long time to come, but her concern over the things she had overheard affected her still more.

She had still not solved the problem when Sheriff Colton arrived the next morning to see if Hank or Quall had got home. As he announced his intention of riding over to the Clawhammer, she was inspired to write the note which Ed Boyce was later to find on his sister's bed.

At three o'clock that afternoon both girls were at the appointed meeting place. Ina had reached the spot first and when the car stopped she walked eagerly up to it.

"Hello, dear," Ellen greeted. "You see I'm on time."

"I'm certainly glad you are," Ina said with relief. "I was afraid you wouldn't come."

"Why, of course I'd come; even if it was just a simple request. But if it's as serious as your note implied, you should have come to the ranch, no matter what my brother said."

"I'll never do that," Ina said grimly. "Not unless he takes back a lot."

"I'm glad you leave a way open for a diplomatic exchange anyway," Ellen smiled. "But what is the trouble you mentioned?"

"You're in great danger. You mustn't stay at the ranch alone any more."

"But what is the danger?"

"The danger is that some dark night, a bunch of tough characters will ride up to the ranch and you won't be there no more," Ina said succinctly. Her voice carried conviction and a cold shudder ran over the other girl.

"How do you know that?" Ellen asked a little tremulously.

"I heard some men talking. I know they meant what they said."

"But who were they?"

This was a question which Ina had been expecting, and she had previously made up her mind not to answer. She had no proof, and though Ellen might believe her nobody else would, and it would almost certainly get her, and probably others, into trouble.

"I can't tell you that," she said.

"Not friends of yours, surely?"

"Not hardly." A bitter little smile curved Ina's lips.

"Were they by any chance these Highhouses?"

Ellen pressed. Boyce had told her something of his suspicion concerning that family group.

"I wouldn't tell you if it was them," Ina said shortly. "But it happens that it wasn't. I think they were outlaws from Plummer's Hole."

"I see. You are certain that they have—designs upon me?"

"They said they wanted to kidnap you so that they could make your brother do what they wanted."

"If they don't get me, what will they do to—to my brother?"

"I don't know, except that the leader said he mustn't be killed—that he wouldn't be of any use to them dead."

"Thank God for that," Ellen breathed. She no longer treated the other girl's warning lightly. She had the good sense to realize that she and Ed both stood in dire peril. "But there are situations I can imagine where Ed would sooner face death than the kind of surrender they might demand," she added.

Ina nodded solemnly. "He's that kind," she testified. She knew without pausing to think about it that Ed Boyce was the kind of man who would face death without a whimper rather than accept dishonor. He was a real man—she recognized that fact with characteristic honesty, despite the trouble she had had with him; but for some strange reason the thought embittered her. She would have liked it better if he had been less forceful in his ways.

"I'm afraid for Ed," Ellen said in a low voice. "That is the reason I insisted upon staying at the ranch. I—I—wanted to share his danger. But now—now I'm afraid that I'm only increasing it."

"That's just it," Ina said eagerly. "I was afraid you wouldn't see it."

"I've been thinking of it for some time and had about concluded that it was selfish of me. Ed works hard all day, and then has to spend half the night riding home because of me. I see it isn't fair. But, oh, Ina, it breaks my heart not to be able to share his danger."

There were sympathetic tears in Ina's eyes, but it would not do to show too much feeling lest she defeat her own purpose.

"What can I do?" Ellen worried.

"Go to Daggett an' stay there till you can convince him that he'd better let somebody else buck these outlaws," Ina advised earnestly.

"I—I—suppose that is best," Ellen admitted. "I'll go to-morrow."

"Don't wait till to-morrow—go to-night," Ina urged.

"But I must see Ed and explain things to him."

"Believe me, he'll feel a lot safer with you in Daggett."

"I suppose my stubbornness and selfishness has caused him a lot of anxiety and trouble," Ellen said ruefully. "But I hate to go away without seeing him."

"I didn't sleep a wink last night for fear that I'd be too late with my warning," Ina stated quietly.

"Only one thing could make me go, and that is if I thought Ed would be in more danger because of my being there——"

"He will. If you're there when they come, you know what'll happen. If you're not there, he'll have a much better chance to escape," Ina pointed out.

Ellen was quick to see the logic of Ina's argument, and she had another reason for going to Daggett that night. She could go to the Sheriff and tell him, without mentioning names, what she had heard, and perhaps influence him to send a deputy out to the round-up to make sure that nothing happened to Ed.

First, however, she had to return home and write a full explanation of her actions to Ed, which she did. She urged Ina to accompany her to the ranch, but the range girl was adamant. She would not set foot upon the Clawhammer ranch.

Back at the ranch she wrote a letter explaining to Ed that she had become convinced of her selfishness in causing him to have to ride so many miles after dark, so she was going to Daggett to remain until after the round-up was over. She said nothing of the warning she had received, feeling that it would only give him more cause to worry. The note she gave to Hung Fat with strict admonitions to give it to Ed when he arrived. Then she got into the car and drove to Daggett. She was nearly to town before she remembered that she had left Ina's note in her room, but she felt certain that Ed would not find it.

And all might have gone well had her movements not been observed by a man who skulked upon the top of the ridge which overlooked the buildings. The man, Skelly, now that he was in hiding from the law because of his part in the abduction of Boyce, had nothing better to do than to act as a spy for the outlaws. It was just such a task as the fellow loved to do, and he still smarted from the humiliation he had endured when Ellen Boyce's eyes were upon him. His degenerate mind would gladly have accepted any chance to injure the girl, but he was sensible enough not to attempt anything of the sort in daylight. With the aid of his glasses, he made out that the girl was putting things into her car, and he rightly guessed that she was going to town. Had there been a chance to intercept her he would have done that, but in lieu of that he determined to wait until dusk concealed his approach and then go down and see what he could find at the ranch house.

He quickly ascertained that the ranch was abandoned by everybody but the Chinese cook. By peering in at a window, Skelly saw that Hung Fat was preparing supper for one—and eating his own supper at the same time. With a cruel grin on his face, and a cat-like tread Skelly entered the front of the house, made his way through the dining room, and to the door of the kitchen. The cook's back was to him.

"Stick 'em up!" he shouted shrilly.

A cup of tea had just reached the yellow man's lips, and the contents all went down at a single gulp. Hung Fat gasped and choked, but his hands went obediently above his head.

"Where's yore lady boss, Chinkee?" Skelly demanded.

"Lady boss glone to town," Hung Fat said. "Chinaman damn big fool he no go too."

"Where's Boyce? Will he be home to-night?"

"Yes, boss man he come home all time. Flaid bad man ketch-um young missee."

"Didn't the girl leave any word for him?" Skelly asked carelessly, but he caught the momentary look of fear in the cook's eyes.

"No leave wo'd," Hung Fat denied hastily.

"She didn't, huh? Yo're a damn yaller liar. What did she say?"

"No say. Missee no talkee to China boy."

"Mebbe she didn't, but she musta give you a note or somethin'," Skelly declared, and again he surprised a telltale look upon the Chinaman's usually expressionless countenance.

"No leave anything," Hung Fat said dully.

"So you'll try tuh lie tuh me, will yuh, Chinkee?" Skelly purred. "I'll git the truth an' have that note or I'll have yore yellow hide. Are yuh gonna give it to me?"

"No gottee nothin' to glive," the Chinaman said monotonously.

There was a cruel gleam in Skelly's eyes. It was not often he found anyone whom he knew he could torture without fear of reprisal, and this opportunity was too good to be lost. Then, too, he was sure that the cook did have a note, and he meant to have it. He forced the Chinaman to lie face downward upon the floor, and then he tied his hands together with strong twine that bit deep into the yellow man's flesh. Rolling his victim over, Skelly made a search for a note but without success. Hung Fat had it on his person, but it was concealed in a pocket in the tail of his blouse which no ordinary search would reveal.

"Listen, Chinkee: If you don't come across with that note, I'll take you out on the range to a bunch who'll git it out of you if they have to peel yore hide off with a dull knife."

Hung Fat lapsed into a sullen silence. He made no pretension to bravery, but in the crisis his manhood rose supreme. He would not betray a trust. Skelly kicked and threatened in vain.

It was growing dark and the outlaw began to fear that Boyce might arrive, even though he knew that plans had been laid to prevent that very thing. But plans might go awry, and he had no desire to face Ed Boyce over the sights of a gun. He wanted to get away, but he wanted some proof of his own heroism, so he decided to take the Chinese cook with him. He forced Hung Fat to go outside, and mounting his horse he dropped his lasso rope over the helpless cook's neck and started away. Hung Fat's hands were tied behind his back, so that whenever he faltered the rope tightened about his neck and cut off his breath. There was nothing he could do but follow along after the horse. Occasionally he stumbled and fell and would almost strangle before he could get to his feet, because his captor would not halt.

"Come or drag," Skelly would shout back unfeelingly. And Hung Fat, with torn feet and bruised, rope-burned neck would clamber to his feet and stagger on.

And so Ed Boyce found no note explaining his sister's absence and no cook to tell him what had become of her. The attack on him that night indicated a desire to capture rather than kill him. If the outlaws already had Ellen in their hands, and could also capture him, they would have things entirely in their own hands. He began to see that the stakes for which the outlaws were playing were bigger than he had imagined. His deductions were very nearly correct, for it had been determined to capture both him and Ellen that night. He was to be stopped on his way home, so that the girl could be taken from the ranch house with less difficulty. The rifle bullet that had killed his horse had been fired by Whitey Mason and it could have killed the rider as easily as the horse had the marksman so wished, for Whitey was an expert rifle shot. Only the outlaws had expected to make him surrender after he was afoot, and in this they had failed.

Boyce did not know that the three men who had ambushed him had ridden rapidly to the Clawhammer for the purpose of getting Ellen away before he arrived but had departed when they found the place deserted.

As soon as it became light Boyce went out into the horse pasture. Several teams had been turned in there, as well as a few gentle saddle horses, and after a long, tiresome chase Boyce succeeded in getting them into a corner where he could rope a saddle horse. He found an old saddle at the barn that would serve him and at last he was ready to go. But he was vexed to find that the sun was over an hour high.

When he neared the Bidwell homestead this time he made sure that no one took him by surprise as had happened on the occasion of his previous visit. He saw the huge, hulking Babe puttering about the corrals, but he saw nothing of Ina or the calico horse he had come to associate with her. Ignoring Babe he rode on up to the house. He saw the fat woman disappear inside, and then Luther Bidwell strolled out with an air of cocksure impudence.

"Mornin', stranger. Lost some more colts?" the old man grinned.

"I haven't lost any colts but I've lost something else," Boyce said in a tone that wiped the grin off Bidwell's face. The Clawhammer foreman radiated danger, and the man recognized it.

"Well, I ain't see nothin' over here onusual," Bidwell hastened to say.

"Where's your daughter?" Boyce snapped out.

"Ina? Why—why—she pulled out of here 'fore daylight this mornin'."

"Where'd she go?"

"Now I couldn't tell yuh that. Ina has got so she don't tell her folks nothin' no more. Even if she had I reckon I wouldn't be obleeged tuh tell you," the man said with an air of faint bravery.

"If I thought you knew you certainly would tell me," Boyce said crisply. "She wrote a note to my sister yesterday to lure her away from the ranch so she could be kidnaped by these crook friends of yours, the Highhouses. I knew you people were no good, but I didn't think a girl like that could stoop to commit such a despicable crime."

"Yuh shore about that?" Bidwell demanded.

"Here's the note. It's your daughter's handwritin', ain't it?"

Bidwell inspected the note gravely, and finally admitted that it was. "If Ina's been up tuh anything like that, I don't know anything about it," the man said. "But she's been actin' mighty queer lately, an' it might be that—that——"

"You're sure you don't know where she is?"

"Absolutely sure. She left here this mornin' with a big bunch o' grub tied on behind her saddle, an' I couldn't say which way she went."

Boyce cross-examined the man a few minutes longer, and was forced to admit that he could get nothing out of him. He might have tried longer had he not become convinced that the man really didn't know. In his own mind, however, he was certain that Ina Bidwell had gone with supplies to wherever Ellen was being detained.

Boyce swung his horse around and started back toward the ranch. He felt that it was a matter which he would have to handle alone. An appeal to the bungling county officers could only serve to put Ellen in more danger. He tried to consider the matter coolly. First he would return to the round-up and tell the Dixons what had happened. They would all pretend like they were unaware of anything out of the way so far as Ellen was concerned. The round-up would go on as usual, but he would have a quiet search through the Highhouse hills, and if that failed and nothing else developed in the meantime, he meant to do a little kidnaping himself. If he got his hands on the Bidwell girl he meant to hold her until she told the truth, or else turn her over to the law for prosecution.

Bitter and torn with anxiety as he was, he felt reluctant about taking the final step that would ruin Ina

Bidwell's life. He was glad that it was in the future, and he didn't have to think about it except as a possibility.

But no sooner had Boyce taken his departure from the Bidwell ranch than old Luther Bidwell went inside and wrote a note to Brig Highhouse telling him of Boyce's visit and of the foreman's suspicions. He felt that he owed it as a neighborly duty to a man who had been generous with him. Then he called Babe.

"Take this note up in the Highhouse hills an' give it to the first Highhouse yuh see," he ordered. "Tell 'em it's for Brig."

XIV

BOYCE CALLS FOR A SHOW-DOWN

THE mistake Ed Boyce had made was a perfectly natural one. He had every reason to believe that something had happened to Ellen, and he could not believe that it was anything else than imprisonment. He tried to convince himself that they would not dare to harm the girl; that all they wanted was to put the screws on him. It would be only a short time until they let him know what they wanted. Until then Ellen would be safe.

But after that was the rub. He recognized that it would probably be a choice between letting them rob the Clawhammer, with perhaps his active assistance, or—. He could not frame that thought even in his mind. It was hard to keep his head under the circumstances.

He picked up his rifle where he had left it, and found his saddle undisturbed on the dead horse. He quickly made a change of saddles, and after a short look around which gave no clew as to the identity of the men who had waylaid him, he rode on to where the rodeo was to be held.

It was noon and the rodeo was gathered on a small flat. Five or six hundred head of cattle had been gathered, and one or two small bunches were yet to arrive. Three riders were holding the herd, while the others crowded around the chuck wagon for grub. Outwardly it was a peaceful round-up scene, but the usual air of jollification customary despite the long, hard hours of toil was missing. The men all seemed hard-faced, expectant.

A dozen or more pair of eyes lifted to inspect Boyce as he swung down, but no man vouchsafed him a greeting. Even the Dixons said nothing.

"How's it going, Highhouse?" Boyce casually asked of Brig.

"Not so good. Cattle are workin' back toward the ranches," was the sullen reply.

"Good, that's where I want mine," Boyce said, and again the eyes of the men were inquiringly on him, but nobody asked a question.

"How come yuh to be ridin' that old spavined cayuse?" Jack Parmer queried suddenly, as he noticed the change of horses.

"Other one fell down an' killed himself last night," Boyce answered in a casual tone. "Had to walk ten miles home." He had just filled his plate with beans which he appeared to be regarding with studious care, yet not a flicker of expression on the faces of the men escaped him. The men he watched most closely were Ace, Jake and Folland Highhouse. They betrayed no more than mild interest, but he saw George Weeks look furtively toward the two punchers whom Boyce believed were brothers despite the difference in surnames. He wondered then if it was possible these were the men instead of the three he had suspected. He did not know for sure that there had been only three, but the number and direction of their shots had indicated as much.

"How was Ellen?" Dan Dixon inquired.

"Feelin' fine," Boyce said heartily. "Crazy about ranch life."

This time he was particularly watching Weeks and his two friends, and he saw a meaning exchange of glances, but what it meant he didn't know. If they had abducted Ellen, they must know that he was lying, but their looks had not seemed to imply that. In fact, as nearly as he could read those glances, they expressed confirmation of some previously expressed guess, and perhaps some disappoinment.

"Sorry I can't stay an' help this afternoon, but I've got to get back to the ranch so I can drive to Daggett before the stores close," he said after dinner. He could see that his words had registered, and the whole crew imputed far more significance to them than the situation justified.

He went out to the place where the remuda was being held for the men to get their afternoon mounts, and caught the best horse in his own string. He found Don Dixon by his side.

"Horses do fall an' break their necks sometimes, but it's dawg-goned seldom," Don declared. "Did it ever happen to you?"

"In all my years of ridin' it never happened but once," Ed replied. "That was ten years ago."

"I thought so. What happened?"

"He was shot," Ed answered. "Some bullets sorta flowed over me, but I think it was a joke."

"No doubt."

"Anyway, I don't think they meant to erase me plumb entire," Ed said. "Don, when I got home Ellen wasn't there."

"She wasn't? Do—do you mean somethin' happened to her?"

"I'm afraid so!" He told about the note, and the other circumstances which had influenced his opinion.

"An' you never let on! I hand it to you, Ed—that took nerve. But what're we goin' tuh do?"

"Carry on with the round-up an' keep your eyes open. Until a few minutes ago I thought it was the Highhouses. Now I suspect Weeks, Mason and Groat of havin' a big hand in it. The fact is, Don, every man on this whoop-up except us three are outlaws."

"An' we're just playin' around on their doorstep like innocent little lambs waitin' for the bottle."

"An' gittin the ax," Boyce added grimly.

"I suppose you're goin' tuh town tuh notify the officers, but what does me an' Dan do?"

"If I'd been goin' to see the officers, I wouldn't have waited to come out here," Boyce said. "Don't forget that it's still our business to look after Clawhammer cattle. If us three pulled away from the job, I think we could look for the whole lay-out in Plummer's Hole. You boys say nothin' but keep your eyes open. I'm going to look for Ellen."

"You're the boss, but if it was me, I'd say let the bloody cattle go till we find out what's become of her," Don argued.

"No, it can't be done. If we stopped this round-up, they'd know at once what we meant to do. For the present, leave the search to me. I'm going to visit the Highhouse country this afternoon. Don't worry if I don't show up to-morrow."

"All right," Don said grudgingly. "But if you don't show up then, this whoop-up can git along without a pair of Dixons."

Boyce had kept his eyes open while the round-up was in the Highhouse hills, and he had a pretty thorough knowledge of the country there. He had found out where Ock Highhouse, the man with the long beard lived, and this was the place he intended to look over first.

Most of the Highhouse ranches were small and located in cañon mouths where small creeks furnished water for their hay. Ock's house was directly in a cañon, and was built upon a creek bank, and almost entirely surrounded with willows. The ridge on the north side was steep and high, and lined with shale rock slides. On the south side were numerous steep draws filled with aspen and maple almost to the top. Below the house was the open hay land. All in all it was a very difficult place to approach secretly.

Och Highhouse had not been to the round-up except on that one occasion. Boyce was sure he would find the man at home, and he decided to ride up openly rather than attempt any spying. Lurking and spying were not tactics which appealed to him anyway. If it had to be done, he would resort to it later. Now he felt that he could come closer to the desired information by a straight talk.

Two hours before his arrival there, Babe Bidwell had handed his father's letter to Ock Highhouse. The letter was unsealed, and Ock had not hesitated to read it. His bearded lips parted in an evil grin. If this fellow Boyce could be made to continue to believe that his sister had been kidnaped, then it was just as good as though the actual fact had been accomplished —and far safer. Indeed, it appealed to his sense of humor.

"You wait here, Babe," he said. "I may have somethin' for you to do." Chuckling into his beard, he walked along a trail through the brush until he was some three hundred yards above his house. He turned off abruptly to the left and weaved in and out through the brush until he reached the bottom of one of the aspen-covered draws. A short distance up this he stopped and whistled three short, shrill notes. A moment later the ugly head of Quall Bidwell appeared.

"Hello, Ock. What's doin'?" Quall asked eagerly. He had now abandoned the sling for his arm. Hank appeared behind him, and his face retained only a few scabs.

"Go on back," Ock ordered, and the men withdrew into a carefully camouflaged dugout—a whisky still that was Ock's chief source of income.

"I guess it wasn't such a bad break you fellers comin' here. Mebbe you can be useful after all," he said.

"Well, we got damn tired o' stayin' up there with the ghost of that miner," Hank said. "We gotta have action."

"You go pryin' around an' yuh'll run plump into that Sheriff, that's what you'll do," Ock sneered. "Yuh'll either stay right here or you'll go back tuh that cabin yuh come from."

"But I thought yuh said we could be useful," Hank remonstrated.

"Yuh can. Here's an interestin' letter from yore old man."

The two read the letter with an air of puzzlement.

"But what's it mean? Has somebody got the girl or ain't they?" Quall asked, his slow wits failing to grasp the situation.

"Of course not. The girl must have gone to town, or else that sister of yours has lured her off some place tuh make Boyce turn Roy loose. She's a smart one, Ina is."

"Too damn smart," Quall agreed.

"Well, as long as Boyce thinks she's been took, the thing is tuh play up tuh his ideas," Ock went on. "He blames you fellers fer all his troubles, an' yo're on the underground anyway. I want you to write a note to Boyce demandin'—I'll tell yuh what tuh write. Here's paper an' a pencil."

"I can't hardly write my own name, an' Hank ain't much better," Quall objected.

"That's fine. Write 'er down, Hank."

Hank seated himself before a covered barrel of mash and laboriously wrote out the words as Ock dictated.

> miSTer boYse. We have kid naped yore Sister. come Across ef you Dont want sonetHin dredful to hapen her. First off you let RoY go then you com alone to the norTh West corner Post of the claw-Hammer ranch and youl be took to where yore Sister is at. Nothin will hapen to Either of you as long as you sign bills of SaLe fer the cattle as we ask you to. When weve plundored everythinG we want you can both go fre. them terms may seem hard but if you dont do as we Say youl never see yore Sister alive again,. no Foolin siGned . some desprite men.

"But, look here, Ock: that'll put us in the pen if they ever find out who wrote it," Hank protested.

"Put yuh in the pen nothin'," Ock scoffed. "They've already got a kidnapin' charge against yuh, yuh fools. The only way tuh git that drapped is to force Boyce tuh sign a paper sayin' that he never was kidnaped. When we git our hands on him we can make him do anything. What we plan tuh do is make him confess that he's the crook. Then Brig gits back in an' we have things our own way. The only chance you take is by not doin' anything."

"I b'lieve Ock's right," Quall declared wisely. "I'm shore tired o' layin' around doin' nothin'. An' I'd like tuh show that bird he can't knock me down an' shoot me up an' git away with it."

"I think this'd orta have Brig's approval, but I'm too busy tuh go myself," Ock stated. "Think that simple brother o' yours could take it over to the round-up?"

"Shore. That's one thing about Babe—he allus does just as he's told. Git an idee into his head an' yuh can't knock it out," Quall replied.

"Good. I'll just write a brief line tuh Brig tuh send along, explainin' our idees," Ock said. He took the pencil and another sheet of paper and scrawled:

> DEAR BRIG:
>
> Right here's a chance to get everything we want without the risk of taking that girl. We can make Boyce frame himself so tight that he can't budge, and it'll be a lot better for us to handle this than to let them Plummer's Hole fellers do it and have that much more of a hold on us. OCK.

Ock took all three notes back and gave them to Babe, with explicit instructions that he was to deliver them to Brig Highhouse and nobody else.

"Will Brig gi' me a job?" Babe asked eagerly.

"Sure he'll give you a job—an' I'll give you a fivedollar bill right now. But don't give them to any other Highhouse. If you see Folland or Jake first, you ask 'em where Brig is, but don't trust 'em with the letters. You understand?"

"Sure, I know, I know," Babe said vehemently.

"All right, laddy, on yore way," Ock dismissed him.

Ock Highhouse was sitting in front of his cabin, surrounded by a numerous brood of children when Ed Boyce rode up. To all outward appearances, the man might have been a venerable patriarch reigning benignly over his descendants, but the whole brood skirmished into activity. Boyce had to open a gate and ride in plain sight for a distance of two hundred yards. While he was opening the gate he saw a little girl dash into the house and come out with something which she handed to her father. Ed was certain that it was a gun, and when he got closer he saw that Ock indeed wore his artillery. He had also observed a fourteen-year-old boy from the gate, but when he reached the house the youth was missing. The younger children had also taken themselves out of reach, but they could be seen peering around corners in all directions.

Just before Ed arrived Ock summoned a ten-year-old boy to his side, and this youngster evaporated from the scene also.

"Howdy, Mr. Boyce—light an' rest yore saddle," Ock invited hospitably.

"Thanks, Mr. Highhouse. Reckon I won't be stoppin' long," Boyce refused. "I would like to trouble you for a drink of water, though."

The unexpected request had the effect of throwing an air of uncertainty as to the reason for his presence. Ock shouted for one of his children to bring a dipper of water, and a small girl timidly complied. Ed drank the water and thanked the child.

Boyce had come for a show-down with Ock Highhouse, but he couldn't bring himself to force a gun-play with the man in the presence of his wife and children. Then, too, he had an idea that the fourteen-year-old boy who had disappeared was covering him with a gun from some place of concealment close at hand.

"Mr. Highhouse, in passin' your hay field I noticed a kind of derrick that's new to me. I wonder if you'd be good enough tuh ride down an' show me how it works. Or shall we walk?"

Boyce was surprised that he could make his voice sound so silky when every cell in his brain vibrated with hate.

Ock was plainly nonplused. It seemed a perfectly natural neighborly request, but the letter he had just read from Luther Bidwell, if true, meant that this man's mind must be full of murderous thoughts. He had a feeling that Boyce just wanted to get him away from his base, as it were, but he was at a loss how to refuse. It took him several minutes to make up his mind.

"All right," he said, heaving himself to his feet "We'll walk down through the hay. Buck," he bellowed, "bring yore rifle an' come down in the field with us. You orta git a shot at them badgers that's been diggin' up the meader."

Almost instantly the fourteen-year-old boy appeared with a rifle, and Ed knew that his conjecture about being covered with a gun was correct. He dismounted and walked by Ock Highhouse's side down through the young hay toward the derrick he had commented upon. It was a very ordinary derrick, and he had seen hundreds like it. Young Buck, with his rifle in the crook of his arm, came along about two rods behind the men. The boy handled the weapon with perfect familiarity, and Ed knew that he could be fully as dangerous as a man.

They reached the derrick, discussing nothing more important than the growth of the hay. Boyce turned abruptly and walked toward the boy. "Let me see your gun, son. Mebbe I'd like tuh make a trade with yuh," he smiled.

With a few swift steps he was by the boy's side before either father or son could think how to handle the situation. Buck jerked the rifle to one side, but not quite quick enough; Ed's left hand clutched the barrel, and with a grim smile he twisted the gun out of the stripling's hands.

"Kinda rough about that, wasn't yuh?" Ock demanded hotly.

"Yeah, maybe," Boyce conceded evenly. "But not half as rough as I'll be with you if you don't tell me where my sister is."

"Your what?" Ock's attempt to show surprise was badly done.

"You heard me, you murdering old rascal," Boyce gritted. "I got you out here to get the truth out of you, and I propose to get it."

Ock's eyes anxiously watched the foreman's free hand which hovered not far above the butt of a bone-handled six-gun, but he made no move toward drawing his own weapon. He tried hard to conceal his chagrin, and his anger toward his son.

"I don't know what you're talkin' about," he said.

"You don't know anything about the way I was tricked into a cabin up here either, I suppose," Boyce rasped. "Or about the attempt you made to murder me at the Clawhammer after I escaped?"

"Of course not. Why——"

"Listen to me, Highhouse: I'm not fooled for a minute. One of the fellows who was in that cabin with the Bidwells was your son, Folland. I shot somebody in the foot an' he's limpin' yet. When you followed me to the ranch that time I saw the end of your beard below the mask. Now I know you've got my sister. You'll tell me where she is, or—I'm givin' you an even break."

XV

THREE LETTERS

Ina had left home early the morning of Ed Boyce's visit, principally because her excited nerves demanded constant physical action, and because it was always unpleasant for her at home when her stepmother was awake. She intended to call upon Hank and Quall, and then she meant to take a long ride over the range to inform herself as to conditions in which she had an indirect interest.

Her day's adventures began with the discovery that her half brothers had left the cabin the night before. That they had gone into the Highhouse hills, and that they would be mixed up with whatever new crookedness impended was certain. It made her disgusted and furious with them, but it drew her toward the Highhouse hills rather than to the upper end of the Clawhammer range where the round-up was being conducted, as she had first intended. If she could find them, she meant to tell them that further assistance from her depended upon their immediate return to the cabin.

She had wasted considerable time making the trip to the cabin and she did not hurry her horse. She had brought her lunch, and she stopped to eat it before leaving the Clawhammer range, which she had to cross. She had not gone far after that before she came to a dead horse, with an old saddle lying close beside it. It took her but a moment to ascertain that the horse had been shot, evidently while under a rider. She could also see that the saddle had never been on the horse, for the cinch, as it was adjusted, was much too short. She found where the rider had struck the ground and crawled away. From the looks of things he had escaped, but somebody had thriftily exchanged an old saddle for a better one.

"This has all the earmarks of a near murder," the girl murmured. It brought home to her the gravity of the situation on the range. She had set herself to interfere, and she realized that her sex would not save her if the outlaws ever found out that she had given aid or comfort to the people they were out to destroy. Yet the fact that she did feel herself aligned against them gave her a savage satisfaction.

She saw that the dead animal was a Clawhammer horse, and from the location, and the way it had fallen she concluded that the rider must have been Ed Boyce on his way home. She felt certain now that she had saved Ellen Boyce from the hands of the outlaws, and with the thrill which that gave her was a feeling of relief to find that Boyce himself had escaped.

Being undecided about where to go next—her natural curiosity prompting her to go to the round-up first and find out if anything had happened there and then return by way of the Highhouse hills—she kept on going until she was midway between the two places.

She was still vacillating when she saw a lone horseman riding toward the round-up from the direction in which the Highhouses held forth. She watched for a few minutes, and then with a gasp of surprise she realized that the rider was Babe.

She looked carefully to see that there was nobody else in sight and then galloped across to head off her half brother.

"What are you doing here, Babe?" she asked anxiously. She knew that he frequently took long jaunts over the country on the big bay horse which Roy had given him because it was strong enough to carry his great weight, but she had a premonition that his presence here was not due to accident.

"I'm takin' letters to Brig Highhouse," he answered with a manner of great importance.

"Letters? Who gave them to you?"

"Pap sent me with one right after that Boyce feller was to our house, an' then Ock he give me two more," he informed proudly.

"Well, well. Let me see them, will you, Babe?"

"Ock said they was for Brig. He said if I saw Jake or Folland I was to ask where Brig was but not give 'em the letters."

Ina meant to get the letters, but if possible she meant to get them without arousing Babe's combativeness. "He was afraid they wouldn't give 'em to Brig, but that didn't mean that I couldn't see them," she wheedled.

She reached out her hand smilingly and Babe, who adored her and would always do as she ordered, handed them over. To Ina's great relief none of them were in an envelope. The first one she opened was the illiterate missive which had been so painfully written by Hank. She knew the handwriting but the meaning baffled her until she read the others. Then the whole truth dawned upon her.

"That damned Chink has got scared an' run off without givin' Boyce Ellen's note," she voiced her one mistake aloud.

She was furiously angry at Hank and Quall for their utter lack of principle, and scarcely less so at her father for his meddling. It was a few minutes before she comprehended just how important were the letters in her hands. The one revealed that a criminal act was to be attempted against Ed Boyce, and the other admitted over the signature of Ock Highhouse that a conspiracy to rob the Clawhammer existed between the Highhouses and the robbers in Plummer's Hole. Her father's note was corroborative of the truth of both the others since it was self-evident that it had motivated them into existence. She realized that into her hands had been thrust a weapon which could at least send the two leaders of the Highhouse clan to prison. She had the "whip seat" and she proposed to hold it.

"Babe, I'm going to the cow camp and I'll see Brig Highhouse. These letters concern me anyway.

But you must go home at once. Your mother is worried about you."

"But Ock he gi' me fi' dollars to take these letters to Brig, an' he said Brig might gi' me a job," Babe protested.

"No, Babe, Brig doesn't hire men any more, and you've already got your five dollars. You go on home. I'll take the letters." She thought of cautioning him not to tell what he had done with them, but she reflected that this might get him into trouble. If by accident he should be questioned she felt that it was better for the blame to fall upon her than him.

"Did you happen to see Hank and Quall up to Ock's place?" she thought to ask.

"No; was they there?" he asked innocently.

"Well, you'd have seen them if they was," she parried, and sent the poor fellow on his way with a smile.

As soon as Babe was out of sight, Ina started out to do the things which she knew to be necessary. First of all she had to find or get word to Ed Boyce that Ellen was safe. Much as she thought she hated him, she could not subject him to this kind of torture when she could set his mind at rest. The only place she knew to look for him was at the round-up.

But as she rode along her mind was busy trying to figure out the best use for the evidence which had come into her possession. Certainly she had no intention of turning it over to Ed Boyce. She would as soon have thought of giving it to Brig Highhouse. Nor would she give it to the law. Hank and Quall would be the chief sufferers, and she had a point to gain for herself—Roy's freedom. Possibly salvation from a hated marriage with Ace Highhouse. She made up her mind to seek Hank and Quall after she had relieved Boyce's fears. She would tell them frankly that she held their damning letter and would use it unless she got the thing she wanted. They would have to sever all connections with the Highhouses, and agree, in writing, to testify against them if called upon.

Then she would lay down the law to Brig and Ock Highhouse. She would give them a brief time to leave the Highhouse hills forever on pain of having the letters turned over to the law. She felt sure that they could be bluffed. And while they were preparing to leave, she would strike a bargain with Ed Boyce. If he would release Roy, she would answer for the Highhouses leaving the country. If Brig and Ock left, she felt that the whole flock would follow—unless it might be Ace. She turned a bit cold whenever she thought of him. Her settlement with him would have to be on a different basis.

Obviously, it was highly important that the notes be where the Highhouses could not recover them. She thought of hiding them some place on the range, but she realized instantly that she might never be able to return to them in case the outlaws decided to watch her movements. She felt the comforting handle of the gun at her waist, and decided that the safest place for them for the present was on her person. She stopped and removed one of her riding boots, and thrust the three letters up between the laced bottoms of her riding breeches and her stocking, and then drew on the boot. If anybody got them they would earn them, she thought grimly.

She reached the rodeo while the cutting out was still in process, and at once she was joined by Ace Highhouse who displayed a most irksome proprietorial air.

"Long way from home, ain't you, Ina?" he demanded.

"Have you ever heard that I was afraid to be out alone after dark?" she retorted.

"Well, no," he admitted with a laugh. "Still, as the gal who's goin' tuh be my wife, I don't like tuh see yuh takin' chances."

"I'm not takin' any, Ace. I can always take care of myself—don't forget that."

"Takin' a slam at me or somethin'?" he demanded a little angrily.

"Why should I? Where's Boyce?"

"Oh, him? He's gone to Daggett. We're givin' him all the rope he wants. When we git ready, all we gotta do is jerk in the slack. Don't you worry none. When Roy's case is called Boyce won't be there tuh answer no roll calls."

"He's gone to Daggett? How do you know?"

"He was here at noon, an' he left soon after. Said that's where he was goin'."

"I see." This meant then that Boyce would soon know the truth about Ellen, and that was one matter she could dismiss from her mind. She saw Brig Highhouse watching her, and despite her cool courage a shiver of fear shot through her as she reflected what he was going to think as soon as he learned that she had in her possession letters intended for him, which would likely send him to prison.

"Say, I'm goin' home with yuh," Ace said. "You stick around a few minutes an' I'll be ready."

She had not looked for anything like that, but Ace didn't ask permission to do anything. He simply did it. As she rode around the herd she was, as always, fascinated by the sight of a round-up in progress. The sleek, heaving sides and white faces of the bewildered cattle as they milled helplessly to get as far away from the riders who held them as possible; the clever work of the cow ponies as their keen-eyed riders picked out the animal they wanted, and let the ponies nose them out of the herd and shoot them, with uncanny precision, across to the bunch where they belonged, always seeming to know just what move the cow was going to make and being there to head her off in the nick of time; the hot smell of the earth as it came to her in the cloud of dust kicked up by the hundreds of trampling hoofs—it was her world. And she knew that if they would let her she was as good a hand as any.

She noticed that one or the other of the Dixon twins was always watching her closely, and their attitude could not by any means be mistaken as friendly. Then Jack Parmer rode up to her side.

"Hello, Ina," he greeted hurriedly. "What d'ye know?"

"About what?" she countered.

"About the way things are goin'. You know as well as I do that certain people are out to fix this new boss of the Clawhammer. It's jake with me, an' I figger to git my share, but there's limits tuh what I'll do. These people are figgerin' on gittin' Miss Boyce an' takin' her into Plummer's Hole. By Gawd, I won't stand for it. Can't you do somethin' tuh make her play safe?"

"I have, Jack," she answered. "I got her to go to Daggett."

"The devil you did? Why at noon Boyce was sayin' how much she liked ranch life, an' he said he was goin' to Daggett this afternoon, but he sure didn't say she had already gone to stay. Of course, I guessed that she wasn't at the ranch last night so——"

"How did you guess it?" she asked quickly.

"They don't tell me everything, but Weeks an' these two other fellers that Joe Dice sent from the Hole slipped away before Boyce started, an' he come back sayin' his horse had fell and broke its neck. They didn't git in till long after midnight, but they didn't have the girl. I'm sure of that," he explained.

This let her know who had killed Boyce's horse, but she was unable to guess what the foreman's game was. She began to doubt that he had gone to town.

Jack Parmer showed some evidence of being far superior in character to his outlaw associates. She wondered if she could trust him.

"Jack, how did you ever come to get mixed up with this gang?" she asked.

"Oh, the usual thing, I s'pose. I got mixed up in a stealin' scrape an' had time tuh make my git-away. I'd heard of Plummer's Hole so I made for there an' convinced Joe Dice I was really on the dodge. He sent me up here to work on the Clawhammer for Brig Highhouse, along with Skelly, Weeks an' yore brothers. I'm not a squealer but I sure don't like the game they're playin' here," he explained as his attitude.

"That's me, Jack," the girl said softly. "This gang is too rough for us. We can't stand for either murder or kidnaping. But that's what'll happen if something ain't done: I've got some evidence that'll put the Highhouses behind bars if they don't drop this thing, but I don't know what this Joe Dice may do. Will you keep yore eyes open an' try to let me know if they decide on anything desperate?"

"You bet I will, Ina. You're a brick. Gawd only knows how you can be what you are an' still be a

Bidwell, but if ever I can help you or that other girl, you can count on me," he said with an earnestness that she knew was genuine.

"Thanks, Jack," she said sincerely, and touched his gloved hand with hers.

At that moment Ace Highhouse rode up and announced that he was ready to start. She had to ride away with the fellow but she knew that he might embarrass her plans considerably. She was wondering what Boyce was up to, and as she rode away with Ace she saw the Dixon boys get together and she knew they must be discussing her. Despite the fact that she had the damning letters in her possession, she had an intuition of impending danger. But strangely enough it did not occur to her that she might be the one in danger—it was always the Boyces she thought of in that connection.

Hank and Quall were at Ock Highhouse's place and she determined to see them in spite of Ace Highhouse.

"I've got to see Hank and Quall before I go home," she said. "They've left the cabin where they were hidden an' are up at your Uncle Ock's. The Sheriff is still hunting for 'em."

"He can't find 'em up at Ock's, but mebbe you'd just as well stay all night there yoreself," Ace said.

They had reached the lane leading to Ock Highhouse's cabin when they met Ed Boyce.

XVI

INA USES HER GUN

Ock Highhouse's face had turned a ghastly green above the beard when he saw his plan to keep Ed Boyce always at a disadvantage frustrated by the latter's quickness of mind and hand. He knew there was no use longer to deny his part in the attempts that had been made to capture and hold Boyce. And he knew that he dared not risk his life by making a draw when Boyce had an even break.

"Come on. Out with it—where's my sister?" Boyce breathed threateningly.

"I don't know, Boyce," the man denied.

"I'll give you till I count ten under my breath tuh tell me the truth," Boyce said evenly.

"The Bidwells have got her," Ock said explosively.

"Where?"

"I don't know. All I know is that they sent a note up here which said they had her, an' it was meant for you. It said that unless you come tuh time an' done what was wanted that yuh'd never see her again. They wanted us tuh see that you got the note. They sent it by that half-witted one they call Babe, an' I sent him on over to the round-up to deliver it to my brother Brig so he could give it to you," Ock explained.

A sense of bafflement settled over Boyce. What could he do? Killing this scoundrel would not help

Ellen. Indeed, anything that he might do was dangerous to her. He thought of trying to hold this man as a hostage, but realized that it would only encumber his own movements and would probably do no good.

"You don't deny that you and your brother expect to control the Clawhammer through this?" he queried.

Old Ock thought a minute. "No; I don't," he admitted. "Yo're just lucky that yuh got a sister. If it wasn't for her givin' us a hold on yuh we'd bump yuh off if yuh didn't see our way."

"And if it wasn't for her, I'd bump you off where yuh stand," Boyce retorted.

"Yore sister is on her way tuh Plummer's Hole," Ock lied. "Best thing you can do is make terms with us. I'll send the boy after Brig, an' we'll let yuh know what we want."

Boyce tried hard to think what was best to do. He had no reason to doubt the truthfulness of what the man said. If, to save Ellen, he accepted infamy, disgrace and dishonor, he would also have to surrender himself to his foes. What assurance would he have after that that either of them would be safe? These men were desperate criminals. After they got what they wanted, they were far more likely to murder both of them than take chances by letting them go. For Ellen it might be worse.

Suddenly he knew that he had to gamble with Ellen's life. The chance of saving her might be slim, but it remained a chance so long as he retained his freedom of action. Once he surrendered, they would be utterly at the mercy of men who knew no mercy.

He reached out and jerked Highhouse's gun from the holster and threw it far away into the grass. Then he did the same thing with the boy's rifle.

"Highhouse, God alone knows why I don't kill you, and just as many more of your lousy breed as I can," he said through tightly clinched jaws. "None of you are fit to live. I suppose I'll have to give up, in the end, but I'm goin' back to the round-up an' collect my men. Then I'll have it out with yore brother and his gang. If I thought they wouldn't come to time, I think I'd kill you where you stand. But don't try to head me off because you can't do it in the first place and it'll be worse for you if you do. And don't try sendin' any boys."

Would Highhouse believe that he was fool enough to trust to the men who had been planted on him because they were crooked? Regarding the man closely, he believed that he did. Highhouse showed signs of feeling relief. Ed believed that he stood just one chance. He had gained a few hours' time by forcing the truth from Ock Highhouse. They would be expecting him to waste some time in negotiations, but instead of that, while they were waiting for him to make known his attitude, he would be on his way to Plummer's Hole. Most of the outlaws were on the

Clawhammer range, and he might be able to overhaul the Bidwells, or whoever else might be with Ellen, and get her back.

He thought of tying Ock and his young son up to make sure that they didn't communicate with the others too soon, but gave up the idea as impracticable. He couldn't tie up the whole family, women and children as well as old Ock, and so it would do no good to tie anybody. Nor did he care to encumber himself by taking them along.

"Come on," he ordered curtly. "We'll go back to the road, while you send this kid up to the house for my horse. If there's any monkey business on the way you'll pay for it."

"Go on an' git his horse, an' don't let no grass grow under yore feet, Buck," Ock instructed his son.

"Lead the horse back, an' don't bother to get one of your own," Boyce added.

The horse was brought in a reasonable time, and Boyce mounted. It was half a mile back to the house, and by the time Ock and his son walked back there and secured horses he would be out of sight and they would stand no chance to overtake him and spy upon his movements or to enable the other outlaws to head him off. He didn't believe they would be in any great hurry anyway. Both of them had been rather badly scared. A few minutes later he was to come face to face with Ina Bidwell.

Truly they were meeting under dramatic circumstances. The nerves of both were keyed up to the highest pitch. Each one knew the impending danger. Boyce knew that he was invading an outlaw hang-out where the odds were heavy that he would not return. Ina knew that when she reached Ock Highhouse's cabin it would be made known that the letters had not been delivered to old Brig, and her part would surely be suspected. How far they would go to get those letters she could not know.

Both of them realized as they met that the other played a prominent part in the intertwined events which had led up to the crisis confronting them, but each misunderstood the motives of the other. Ed was the more at fault here, for he was firmly convinced that the girl was one of his bitterest enemies.

Ina knew that when the truth came out she would have no friends. Hank and Quall would be more eager and just as brutal as the Highhouses once they knew her game. Ace would not hesitate about trying to make her give up her evidence. Her gun was her only defense and she had reason to doubt that it would be sufficient. She could tell Ed Boyce that she had evidence enough in her boot to confuse his foes and if he doubted her word she could prove it. Ace might make trouble but she would be watching him if Boyce couldn't take care of him. Together they could defeat the Highhouses.

But Ina was not ready to show her hand until she had fully strengthened her position if it could be avoided. She wanted to see her brothers, and then conceal the papers in some safe place where they could be available when necessary. Then she would be in position to demand justice for Roy, without giving Boyce a chance to claim any credit at all for the victory over the outlaws. In other words, she wanted to force him to make an abject surrender in their personal feud. Her common sense told her, however, that it might be best to place her cards on the table then and there. Much depended upon his attitude.

Ace Highhouse was the first to speak. "Well, Boyce, I thought yuh'd gone to town," he said.

"Did you?" Boyce responded coldly. "I've just had a talk with an uncle of yours up here, an' something he said made me think I'd better go back to the round-up this evenin'." His eyes rested for a moment upon Ina and in their depths she read a contempt that seared her very soul. All thought of telling him now what she knew was driven from her mind. She would let him suffer awhile. But she did not see the pain he felt because that contempt seemed necessary.

"That's funny. What was it?" Ace asked with his usual lack of reticence.

"It had to do with a letter which the lady's brother"—he indicated Ina with an expressive, sardonic nod of the head—"brought up here to be delivered to me. They sent him on to the round-up, so I'm goin' there to get it."

"S'funny—I didn't see anything of Babe around there," Ace commented. "Did you, Ina?"

"Why, yes. I met Babe, an' when he told me he had some letters for Mr. Boyce I told him to go straight home an' leave the letters at the Clawhammer ranch house," she said. An instant later she added maliciously, "I'd forgot about you orderin' him an' all other Bidwells to keep away from there."

Boyce was severely puzzled. What the girl's game was he couldn't understand, but for some reason or other she wanted to send him on a wild goose chase back to the ranch. He had no intention of going.

"Do you know where my sister is?" he asked bluntly.

"I certainly do," she replied swiftly. "She's in Daggett."

He gave her a long, hard look which expressed clearer than words his disbelief. A wave of angry color swept over the girl's cheeks. She had told him the truth; if he wouldn't believe it that was his own fault.

"Thanks," he said sarcastically. "I guess I'll ride to the ranch then an' find out what the Bidwells have to write to me." He touched his horse lightly with the spurs and rode on. But he had not changed his mind about proceeding to Plummer's Hole.

"What the hell did he mean about askin' you where his sister is?" Ace demanded.

"He's got the idea that she's been kidnaped."

"And is she in Daggett?"

"Of course."

"But what about them letters Babe had."

"I suppose it's somebody trying to scare him," she said indifferently. "Let's go on."

There was a puzzled frown upon Ace's face until they reached Ock's cabin.

"See Boyce?" Ock queried.

"Yeah. What's it all about?"

"Why, we've got that bird in a sack, damn him," Ock snarled. "He's headin' for the round-up tuh git his men—his men, mind yuh—tuh fight Brig an' the gang there, an' find out where his sister is. An' the beauty of it is that none of us have got her."

"Well, I kinda gathered that, an' of course him an' them two cussed twins can't do nothin' against the gang, but I'm afraid Dad might have let the cat outa the bag if we hadn't met Boyce," Ace murmured.

"How d'ye mean?" Ock demanded.

"Why, Ina here met Babe an' kinda mussed up the play. She sent him home an' told him tuh leave the letters at the Clawhammer."

"What?" Ock screeched. He turned upon the girl in a raging fury. "Why, yuh damn little fool, them letters wasn't for Boyce—only one of 'em. They was for Brig. I told that idiot not tuh give 'em tuh anybody but Brig, even give him five dollars tuh make sure. I—I'll kill him."

"It wasn't Babe's fault," Ina said hastily. "I made him show me the letters, an' I opened one of them. It was written by Hank an' was surely meant for Boyce. I supposed the others were, too. I know Boyce goes home every night, an' I didn't want Babe out after dark so I told him what I did."

"But the other two letters—didn't you read 'em?" Ock howled.

"I just noticed that one of them was in my dad's handwriting, so I didn't bother no more about it," she answered quietly.

"My Gawd, what a simp! W-why you don't know as much as Babe! Ace, did you say that Boyce had gone tuh the Clawhammer tuh git them letters?"

"That's what he said."

For a minute old Ock was unable to speak. There was foam on his whiskers, and he glared angrily at the girl.

"Do yuh know what she's done, Ace?" he finally burst out. "She's plumb ruined us if Boyce ever gits them letters!"

"Come on—git it outa yuh," Ace growled. "What was in 'em that was so bad?"

"Why, one of 'em stated that his sister had been kidnaped, an' threatened him with all sorts o' things if he didn't come across. Hank Bidwell wrote that. The one her old man wrote just told us how Boyce was thinkin' his sister was kidnaped. But I wrote the third one myself tuh tell Brig what a strangle hold it would give us on him without lettin' Dice's outfit into it. An'—I signed my name, an' wrote Brig's. I never dreamed anybody else would git it," old Ock gasped, trembling like a frightened boy.

"Well, it looks tuh me like you'd been a bigger fool than Ina," Ace sneered.

"But don't yuh see: If Boyce finds them three letters, he'll fog right into Daggett an turn 'em over tuh the law. He'll find his sister safe, too, an' then he won't have nothin' tuh fear. Me an' yore dad'll shore go over the road, an' if them Bidwells turn state's evidence, as they will, you'll all go," Ock shouted excitedly.

"Where are the Bidwells?" Ace demanded, thinking first of his own safety.

"Right up here in the still. But never mind them. What we've gottuh do is beat Boyce home an' git them letters. I could kill this damn girl."

"You might try, but if you do you'll find yourself hung on the business end of a bullet," the girl retorted.

"Shut up, both of you," Ace snarled, "an' let me think."

"Buck, go git our horses," Ock roared. "If he won't do somethin' about it we will."

"Come on, Ina," Ace ordered. "We've got a good chance to beat him there."

"Go ahead. I don't see why I should ride my head off," the girl replied coolly. "It's not me who's trying to frame Boyce."

"You're into this as deep as anybody else. You claimed you wanted him put away in brine so Roy could come clear. An' this is yore fault. Come on an' ride an' don't stop tuh arger."

"You said you'd have Roy cleared if I'd marry you," Ina reminded. "Are you afraid you'll meet Boyce an' need some help?"

That stung young Highhouse upon his one tender point, his vanity. "No; I don't need help, an' I'll git them letters back or bring in Boyce's scalp," he rasped, and, wheeling his horse, he dashed away.

Ina was strongly tempted to dash after him. He wouldn't get the letters, and there was slight chance that he could even beat Boyce to the ranch. But he might encounter Boyce, and then— She refused to consider the possibilities. If they met one or the other would probably die. She felt that it would be Ace, but she could not force herself to feel any concern at that outcome, and she resolutely refused to consider the other possibility because of the queer sensations it produced. She hoped Boyce would go on to town when he found the letters were not there and believed that he would. Anyway, she felt sure that she would soon be in a position to dictate terms, and among them would be a condition that he be not molested by any of the Highhouses.

Certainly she didn't dream that Boyce was on his way to Plummer's Hole, and for the moment she had forgotten the threat of Joe Dice and his men.

"You'd orta be skun alive," Ock Highhouse growled. It had been an evil day for him, for all that it had begun so auspiciously. The way Boyce had bullied him around was enough to make him murder somebody, and this girl's blunder, as he thought it, had made him a much abused man.

"You just start in any time you feel lucky," Ina invited curtly.

"What're yuh hangin' around here for anyway?" Ock demanded.

"I want to see Quall and Hank. Where are they?"

"None of your business."

"Oh, it ain't, eh? Don't make me mad, Ock. I've been helpin' those boys hide from the Sheriff, but if they've got so big that I can't talk to 'em, I reckon I know who they will talk to," she warned.

"Wouldn't surprise me none if all you lousy Bidwells didn't turn state's evidence in a pinch. We never orta had anything to do with yuh," he raged.

"I'm askin' you where they are," she insisted evenly.

"Aw, hell, go on an' talk to 'em if you want to, but be damned sure tuh tell 'em to keep their mouths shut. Milt!" he bawled at his ten-year-old son, "you go fetch them Bidwells down here. Buck, you git yore rifle from down there in the meader an' git up on the ridge an' watch. I'm goin' tuh the round-up tuh have a talk with Brig."

A few minutes later Hank and Quall came cautiously out of the brush, and Ina, who had remained on her horse, went to meet them. She wanted none of the Highhouse children listening to their talk. She didn't reprimand her brothers for deserting their hiding places.

"Well, you fellows put yourselves into a nice pickle when you wrote that ransom letter," she began, her words coming with just enough scorn to make them cringe.

"What d'ye mean?" Hank blustered, his very manner betraying his fright.

"You let Ock Highhouse persuade you to write it. Now the letter will go to the officers, and the evidence against you will be ironclad."

"How do yuh know it'll go tuh the officers?" Hank asked.

"Because I'm going to turn them over," she said evenly.

"You? What've you got tuh do with it?"

"I've got that letter and another one that'll put you an' the Highhouses in jail, an' believe me I mean to do it."

"Why, you—you——" Hank spluttered.

"Don't blow up," she cautioned with a thin-lipped smile. "You two won't need to suffer if you do as I say. But you've got to go back to that cabin, an' be ready to testify against the Highhouses unless they agree to do what I want."

"What *you* want?" Hank fairly choked.

"What I want," she agreed. "I've got the evidence, and I'm just givin' you two a chance to save yourselves. If you don't want to take it, all right—I'll wash my hands of you."

"How did you git them letters?" Hank croaked.

"From Babe."

"You got 'em on yuh?" Quall asked quietly.

"I have."

The brothers exchanged glances and Quall started toward the head of her horse. "You give me them letters," he bulldozed. At the same time Hank moved as though to get behind her.

Ina spun Checkers swiftly, and Roy's gun appeared in her hand. "Stand back," she said vibrantly. "You know I can shoot, and I'll do it if you don't behave."

They stopped in sheer, helpless amazement. But Quall's rage was too great for him to tolerate being beaten by a girl. With a bellow of rage he leaped forward. Ina turned pale, but she straightened her wrist and pulled the trigger. She tried desperately to aim for his shoulder, but there was no time for good marksmanship, and above all she was afraid that she would miss altogether. If they once laid their hands upon her she knew they would not hesitate at anything to get the letters. Quall's bellow changed abruptly. He spun half around and dropped to the ground.

Ina bravely turned the gun upon Hank. "You want it, too?" she asked.

"My Gawd, yuh've killed him!" Hank exclaimed. "Yore own brother!"

"Oh, you fools," the girl cried. "Why couldn't you behave? I wanted to give you a chance, and now—this!" She suddenly realized that she must get away from there. If she didn't she would break down soon, and then she would lose what advantage she held.

Without waiting to see whether Quall was dead or not, she forced Checkers to walk sideways until she was well past the house. Then she gave him the spurs and galloped him madly until she was miles from the place.

The vision of Quall lying there upon the ground in a sorry huddle was ever before her eyes. She had killed—her brother! He had never given her a kind word. He had beaten her many times for the pleasure of hearing her howl and Hank had never interfered. They would have done her harm now because of their stubborn ignorance; she knew that she was justified, but the thing lay heavy upon her mind.

She stopped her panting mount at last, and regained a portion of her poise. The situation had to be faced. She was utterly alone among a horde of foes. She had something which she now realized they would stop at nothing to get. As long as she could keep it in her possession she had them licked, but keeping it had now become a matter of the utmost danger.

It would be only a short time until Ace would come back without the letters. But before that some of the Highhouses were sure to go back to Ock's and she knew that Hank would betray her without a moment's hesitation. Immediately every man the Highhouse clan could muster would be searching for her.

She again considered the advisability of hiding the letters out there on the range, but decided that there would be little more danger if she retained possession of them. If they caught her she would be unable to use the letters anyway, so it would only add another difficulty by leaving them there. She would have to secrete them sometime, but it would be much better for it to be in a place closer to home, and if possible where she could use them against the men if they did happen to capture her.

She turned Checkers toward home and rode fast, but she chose a route through the most dismal part of the range where there was least chance of contact with her enemies.

It was long after dark before she finally reached home and she still had the papers. As she dismounted from Checkers she realized that she was unutterably weary. She staggered a bit and paused to think of Quall before she undid the latigo.

As she reached for the strap somebody seized both her arms.

"Come across with them letters," Ace Highhouse gritted into her ear.

XVII

TOO MUCH FOR A GIRL

THERE is a limit to human endurance, and Ina felt that she had reached that limit, when Ace Highhouse seized her arms. She had neither strength nor inclination to resist. She had known they would be after her, but she hadn't expected them to strike so soon. All she could feel for the moment was a dull apathy.

"You might let me unsaddle my horse," she said dully.

"I'm not so sure yuh won't be needin' him again right away," Ace answered. "If yuh don't give up them letters I know yuh will."

She forced a low laugh. "You must think you have influence, Ace," she said.

"Plenty with you. I carry it right in my two arms. Where are them letters?"

"Didn't you get 'em?"

"You know damn well I didn't," he said wrathily. "Sent me on a wild race with Boyce when all the time you had the letters in yore pocket. Smart girl you are—but not smart enough tuh make a monkey out of me."

"I couldn't do that—I came on the scene too late," she shot back. She made no effort to resist his brute strength, but he realized that she was still his master with her tongue. It infuriated him.

"I'm askin' yuh where are them letters? I'm gonna have 'em, yuh know."

"How do you know I have them?"

"I thought there was somethin' fishy about that business all the time. I didn't see anything of 'em at the Clawhammer, nor any sign of Boyce neither. Naturally I come on over tuh see Babe, an' he told me he'd give 'em to you. I come back here after dark tuh wait fer yuh. Yuh lied to me."

She decided that she must make her biggest play now. "All right. I had to have a chance to hide them, so if I did run across any of you people you couldn't take 'em away from me."

"Yuh mean yuh ain't got 'em on yuh?"

"Certainly not," she said so emphatically that he seemed convinced she didn't have them. But he still retained his grasp on her arms.

"What's the idee?" he ground out.

"Those letters were too good tuh lose. As long as I can keep them I've got a grip on the Highhouses. Those letters will send you all to the penitentiary, Ace."

"But why? What've we done tuh you?" he asked reasonably.

"You're outlaws, Ace—crooks. My people, except Roy, are just as bad. I hate the things you stand for. You'd take that poor girl if you could and scare her half to death—maybe worse. You'd murder Boyce in a minute if it served your purpose. In other words, there's no decent thing about any of you."

All the resentment of years was poured out in a few vibrant sentences. Yet even then she felt that Ace was not altogether responsible for what he was. It was the older generation and his environment which had made him, but he was just as lawless as any of them and that fact had to be recognized.

"What the hell is the matter with you?" he demanded, at first more puzzled than angry. "Got religion or something?"

"I've got nothing except determination that the Highhouses must leave this country," she said.

"You what? Why, why, a girl like you sayin' that we—that we've gotta leave the country!" Words failing him he gripped her arms with a force that brought tears of pain to her eyes, though she refused to cry out.

"It's either that or go to the penitentiary," she said defiantly. "You can tell your father and old Ock that."

"But listen to reason: you wanted us tuh ketch Boyce an' hold him so Roy wouldn't go up for stealin' them horses. Now yuh're gittin' mushy an' wanta let him go. What's happened to yuh—I wanta know."

"I guess I've met some decent people for the first time in my life maybe," she said slowly. "Anyway, I mean to stop this robbery of the Clawhammer, an' the Highhouses have got to leave."

"So yuh've fell for this bird, Boyce, huh?" he ground out harshly. "That's a woman fer yuh. Well, yuh can't git away with that stuff with me. You promised to marry me, an', by Gawd yuh'll do it."

"I'll even do that, Ace," she said quietly, "when Roy is released. You tricked me into makin' a bad bargain when you intended all the time to do what you did. But I'll keep my word even though it'll be me who makes Boyce let Roy go. But you've got to leave the country with the rest of them."

"You'll make Boyce let Roy go," he sneered. "Just how yuh gonna do that?"

"I'll do it. Getting Roy released is still the biggest thing in my life. He's not a crook like the rest of the Bidwells and he's going to have his chance in life," she said steadily.

"Not a crook? Where d'ye git that stuff?" he sneered. "Yuh don't mean tuh tell me yuh think he didn't steal them colts?"

"I know he didn't."

Ace Highhouse doubled over with laughter. "That's good," he said at last. "I shore didn't think anybody could pull the wool over yore eyes like that."

"He didn't, I tell you—he didn't!" she cried, struggling for the first time, but he held her fast.

"Why, yuh poor little fool, he was just foolin' you about wantin' tuh go straight. He tried tuh steal them Percheron colts on his own hook. He'd gone down into the valley beforehand an' made arrangements tuh sell 'em tuh Jim Barker, a horse dealer down there. Barker is one of Joe Dice's men, though the kid didn't know it. Barker sent a man tuh Plummer's Hole on purpose tuh ask if it'd be all right fer him tuh buy 'em, an' Dice told him tuh go ahead. O' course, after the sale had been made, Roy'd have found himself bound tuh do whatever Dice said," Ace explained maliciously.

Ina wilted. For years she had been guided by the one purpose to make a real man out of Roy. It had buoyed her up when she had felt that it would be better to end everything. And he had failed her—had lied to her! Had caused her to make a fool of herself by denouncing Boyce for what she thought was his merciless persecution. The whole bottom had gone out of her world. What the Highhouses did to her after that mattered little.

"You lie, Ace Highhouse," she got out finally. "I'll never believe Roy is a thief until he tells me so himself." But her defense was half-hearted. In her own mind she felt that Ace had been telling the truth.

"Believe it or not," he said indifferently. "What I want is them letters. Where are they?"

"You'll never get them," she said more quietly. "What you've told me changes everything. I was going to destroy them after the Highhouses left the country. Now I'm going to turn them over to the law as soon as I can."

It was not a wise thing to say, but she had almost ceased to care. In fighting Ed Boyce she realized she had done an injustice, if Roy had really been guilty. To make amends she was determined to do everything she could against his foes.

"So that's the way yuh feel about it, huh?" Ace said. "Well, yo're goin' back tuh the Highhouse hills with me. Yuh'd better turn them letters over to me now an' save yoreself a lotta grief, because yuh'll have tuh do it sooner or later."

"You can't make me tell where they are if you kill me," she defied.

"Mebbe not. But as long as we've got a hold of you nobody else'll be usin' 'em," he jeered.

He had slackened his hold, and she jerked loose suddenly. But before she could reach for the gun at her waist—her only chance—he had seized her again.

"I'll just take that little plaything," he said, and stuck the weapon down inside his own belt. "Now git back on that horse an' come along peaceable, or will I have tuh throw yuh on an' tie yuh there?"

Ina was too exhausted to make any resistance, and she knew in advance how futile it would be against his tremendous strength. If she cried out for help it would do her no good. Her father would not help, and if Babe came to her rescue Ace might shoot him.

"I'll go," she said dully. "But you're wasting your time."

"We'll see," he said grimly. He held her elbow until she was mounted, and then led her horse out to where his waited.

The faint hope Ina had entertained that she might make a dash for freedom, depending upon Checkers' speed, was doomed when Ace threw the loop of his lasso rope over the pinto's head and took a couple of dallies around his own saddle horn.

It was just coming dawn when they rode up to Ock Highhouse's ranch. This was the usual gathering place for the Highhouse tribe. Brig and Ace had a cabin of their own on a small ranch, but as they were seldom home Ock's place had become headquarters.

Their arrival was announced by the barking of a dog. Since both knew that Ock's dog had recently been killed, it was evident that there were visitors at the place. Both of them recognized it as Jake Highhouse's dog. Indeed, they found that practically the whole tribe had gathered there. Their saddled horses stood around with weary, drooping heads, and the reddened eyes of the men showed that none of them had been to bed.

Ina was so tired that she could hardly hold herself in the saddle, but she raised her eyes to see if Hank was present. He was standing among the other men, but he looked sullen and depressed. His pale eyes glittered with hate as he looked at her.

Old Brig strode forward. "Where yuh been all night, Ace? Did yuh git them letters from that damn gal?"

"I didn't git the letters. She claims she hid 'em, an' won't tell where."

"We've all been in the saddle all night huntin' fer her, an' we're in no mood fer foolin'," Brig declared. "Gimme them letters," he roared at the girl.

Ina didn't deign to reply. She merely gave him a pale, contemptuous smile which made him go berserk.

"Hold on, Dad," Ace cautioned. "No use tuh fly off the handle. Gimme time. I'll git 'em."

"Them letters will queer everything if the Sheriff gits 'em," Brig roared. "Tuh think that this damn fool Ock would take such chances. He orta be hung. An' then tuh have a fool gal—what's yore game?" he bellowed at Ina.

"She's strong fer law'n' order," Ace grinned crookedly. "Goin' tuh have us all jailed."

"She needs a damn good beatin'," Ock opined.

"Do yuh know what yuh've done?" Hank screeched suddenly. "Yuh shot Quall, an' wounded him so that he'll die if he don't have a doctor. An' I can't git a doctor fer him because these fellers are afraid me or him would confess an' implicate them."

"But if the doctor come, you an' Quall would both go tuh the pen fer abductin' that feller Boyce," Ock reminded.

"I don't care—I'd go tuh jail if it'd save Quall," Hank said and broke down with a sob.

"Aw, shut up," several of the men shouted at him disgustedly.

Ina looked at Hank curiously. She had never thought him capable of any self-sacrifice, but after all he and Quall had been very close.

"Give up them letters an' Hank can go after a doctor fer Quall," Ace leaned over and whispered in Ina's ear.

Ina was tempted. She had shot Quall, and now if she let him lay and die when it was in her power to save him then surely she would be guilty of his murder. She couldn't hold out indefinitely against these grim, tough men. Why not have it over with while there was a chance to save Quall?

"How do I know you'd let the doctor come then?" she asked wearily. "You'd be afraid they'd tell what they know."

"No; they wouldn't tell. We'd make 'em understand anyway that there couldn't be any charges against 'em with Boyce out of the way—an' we'd attend to that."

A medley of thoughts beat against her brain in waves. But out of all of them one idea stood out stark and clear. She could save Quall's life, and thus save herself from becoming a murderess, but only at the cost of Ed Boyce's life. So long as she refused to tell where the letters were, she did not believe they would dare to murder Boyce. More than Quall, more than Roy, more than herself, he was to be considered. She loved him.

"You'll never get those letters, no matter what happens," she said steadily.

"Won't we?" Brig raged. "I don't believe she hid 'em at all—chances are she's just bluffin' 'n' is carryin' 'em with her. Women have got an idee that they kin pull that on me. I'm goin' tuh find out whether she's still got 'em or not."

He advanced and catching her by the arm jerked her roughly from the saddle. His hand was at the throat of her shirt ready to rip it from her body when he was sent sprawling backward by his powerful son.

"None o' that," Ace roared. "I don't believe she'd be fool enough tuh keep 'em on her, but if she's goin' tuh be searched, it'll be in a decent manner. She's goin' tuh be my woman, an' I'll kill the first man who lays hands on her again—an' that goes fer you, Dad."

The strain and the reaction at last proved too much for the plucky girl. Without a sound she fell to the ground in a dead faint.

XVIII

IN PLUMMER'S HOLE

Ed Boyce fully comprehended his danger in invading the outlaw hang-out known as Plummer's Hole. No Sheriff with a posse at his back had ever been successful in getting a criminal out of there. All they ever found was empty cabins, but if they persisted too much they invariably were greeted with bullets from impregnable hiding places, and in the end the posses were always glad to withdraw. For one man to invade such a stronghold seemed an absurdity.

Boyce had held no illusion that he was better than other men. He appreciated the risk, and he was going because it was better to take the desperate chance than to submit supinely to what he thought they had done. His bravery was not of the type that refuses to recognize danger or is unable to see it, but the kind that takes every precaution possible, and then goes courageously in to face the odds.

Despite his haste to overtake the outlaws, whom he believed had Ellen, before they would be expecting anything of the kind, he took a circuitous route and lingered long enough to inspect every ridge top before he crossed it. The hills were full of riders, he knew, and he could not afford to betray his movements.

He had never been in the wild, rugged country which lay between the Clawhammer range and the base of the mountain range which made an impenetrable barrier except for the one passage known, for some unknown reason, as Mormon Gap. The gap itself was visible for many miles away, because it was a mere slit full of blue sky between two monstrous shoulders of solid granite which rose grim and forbidding to tower with insolent majesty above the fertile hills. Boyce was quickly to learn that the pass was not as easily reached as it appeared to be. He found himself in cañons which appeared to be taking him toward the pass, but which would suddenly twist away in some other direction in the craziest sort of fashion. Frequently the sides of the cañons were lined with sheer ledges of rock over which a horse could not climb. Then he would have to turn around and go back till he could try some other cañon.

He knew there was a trail to Mormon Gap, probably several of them, but as most of the country was either solid or loose rock, they were not visible to the naked eye. All he could do was keep on exploring until he found a cañon which reached the end of the gap despite the kinks.

To his profound disgust, it began to grow dark on him while he was going away from the gap rather than toward it. Presently he came to a narrow gash between the rocks which was running the same direction he was going. In the darkness he all but overlooked it, and then he thought it would prove to be nothing but a blind pocket. But as it seemed to be necessary to make a stop soon, he decided to investigate. In two or three hundred yards the gash made a bend and then widened abruptly. He found that it led down into another cañon, and in the bottom of that he found spore which proved that it had been traveled lately. Considerably encouraged, he urged his lagging mount onward, hoping that he would at least find a place where there was some grass for his horse.

He found no such place, but the sharp rocks had made his horse's feet so tender that he had to stop anyway.

There was no water, and only an occasional tuft of grass which did the horse little good. The cañon was narrow and Boyce had little fear that his horse could get out of it, and he knew the animal would not be able to get by him in the night; so he unsaddled it and turned it loose above him in the cañon. He found a place where there was soil between two boulders and made his bed with the saddle blanket.

For all his great anxiety, which would have rendered him frantic had he given way to his nerves, he knew that he must conserve his energy and get some rest. It was hard to keep from thinking about Ellen, and, much as he hated it, the vision of Ina Bidwell persisted in coming before his mind's eye. How could she, with that keen, intelligent face and those honest blue gray eyes, do the despicable things she had done? It was a puzzle to which he could find no solution, but which he could not leave unsolved.

With great self-control, he closed his mind like a door and fell into a light sleep. He was awakened many times; twice by the attempt of his horse to get by him in an effort to reach water.

When daylight came he felt in a measure refreshed despite the lack of food and drink. Even his horse moved out more freely. He was sure now that he was in the right cañon and it proved to be so. He had not ridden more than an hour before he caught sight of the end of Mormon Gap above him. A long, hard climb of another hour put him fairly inside the gap.

Though he knew about what to expect in the way of narrowness and steepness of wall, it was more impregnable than he had thought. He could see that several cañons besides the one he had come up headed below it, and once thoroughly in it he could see evidence that the trail in it had been used quite commonly. Nowhere at the bottom was it more than four hundred feet across, and at other places it narrowed to less than a hundred feet. It was a gradual ascent for over a mile; then for half a mile farther it was almost on a level. Even here so high were the adjoining shoulders that Boyce doubted if the noonday sun could ever be seen inside the gap.

But he did observe that the strata of the rocks ran in a uniform direction, and in such fashion that there were ledges of rock running from the bottom of the gap up to dizzy heights to end abruptly, but they all started from the Plummer's Hole side. There were bends and angles in these ledges, and frequently they passed behind jagged columns of rock. Boyce could see how one or two men from inside Plummer's Hole could climb upon these sheltered ledges and hold any number of men at bay until they had to have water. One man on each side and they could never be dislodged if they had somebody behind to bring them supplies. Certainly the outlaws could hold this end of their stronghold indefinitely.

All he hoped now was that he would not overtake his enemies, until he got to a place more favorable for attack. He kept wondering if it was possible that Ellen had been along through this strange pass within a matter of hours. Argue all he would the idea seemed utterly preposterous. Ellen in a place like this—in the hands of hardened desperadoes—it was harking back to the dawn of history, it seemed. But he knew the character of the men with whom he had to deal, and knew that even a woman was not safe where their plans were threatened. Ellen must have passed that way and recently. And yet if she had, he had a superstitious belief that he would in some way be able to *feel* her presence—and he did not.

Presently the cañon began to dip downward, and almost before he knew it Plummer's Hole lay below him. He stopped his horse and for a moment the wildness of the scene took his breath away. It could be called neither valley nor basin. It was surrounded by towering hills and mountains, but there was not a level acre of ground in it. "Hole" was the proper name. Even in the center it was broken by rough hills corrugated by ledges of rock. It was a veritable labyrinth of razorback ridges and knife-blade chasms, but unlike the region at the other end of Mormon Gap most of it was thickly timbered. As a hiding place it was ideal; to attempt to locate anybody there who didn't want to be located seemed to be impossible.

For a few minutes he sat quietly on his horse, then he touched the animal with the spurs and rode on. Having come this far, he was not going to be turned back until he had at least made an effort to come in contact with his foes.

It was a long way down, for the hole was far lower than the Clawhammer range country. On the steep slopes of the other sides Boyce knew there must be trails leading to the outside, but they would be hard for an outsider to find. There was no natural landmark to locate them like there was at Mormon Gap. Truly it was outlaw heaven, and he could see that there was considerable range in various parts of the hole where stolen cattle could be grazed until the bandits were ready to work them out to market. He kept his eyes open for Clawhammer cattle, but on his way down he saw no stock of any kind.

He was on the alert for some sign of a trail turning off, and there seemed plenty, but none of them had been used enough to justify him following any of them. Finally he was at the bottom of the descent and was obliged to go up through a sort of coulee. Immediately every nerve tensed. At any moment now he might expect to be waylaid and it behooved him to use the utmost care.

He was not long in realizing it would take a lone man many days to explore Plummer's Hole, and even then there were sure to be places that he would not visit. Despite the great need for haste, he began to see that his only chance to find the hiding places of the outlaws was to hide himself. By concealing himself beside some used trail and waiting for the outlaws to come along, and then trailing them, he would probably find what he wanted much sooner than if he went blundering about in such a way that they would in all probability see him first and greet him with a bullet from behind some boulder or tree. It was typical of the man's will power that he could force himself to resort to such Fabian tactics when every instinct cried out for him to search feverishly until he found Ellen.

He rode on, however, till he found water; where man and horse drank greedily. Boyce was ravenously hungry, but he wasted no time in grieving over that. The stream he had found ran down from a series of terraces toward the north end of the hole, and he decided to follow it until he found a place where he could safely leave his horse, then go on until he found a trail which had had more use than the one which had brought him to the creek.

He had not gone far before he found a place between a grove of trees and an overhanging cliff where the grass stood a good six inches high, and was as thick as the hair on a dog's back. His horse was entitled to a rest and feed, and Boyce was not loathe to strip the saddle from it, and stake it in the luxurious grass. Then he went on for perhaps a mile on foot, and came to where a fairly well-used trail crossed the small creek and continued toward the northwest.

The creek was thickly lined with brush and was well adapted to the purpose he had in mind. He looked the ground over carefully and then ensconced himself in the thicket within twenty feet of the trail. It was hard to linger there in idleness, but if he went on he might easily get himself into a position from which he could not even retreat. He had not encumbered himself with his rifle but he wasn't looking for fights. He wanted to find Ellen, and, if he could get her away without a battle, so much the better.

The hours passed slowly. He had been without food just long enough for the pangs of hunger to be at their worst. He wondered if he had not foolishly wasted his time when he should have been searching. Most of the afternoon passed and the long evening shadows stole across from the minarets on the west side of Plummer's Hole. He decided that he must get up and move around a little to take the stiffness out of his joints and he craved a cigarette. He was just getting to his feet when he heard the thump of a horse's feet on the hard ground. He dropped back instantly in the nest he had made, and none too quickly, for a man appeared riding at a fast trot. The rider leaned ahead in the saddle with his gloved hands resting on the forks of the saddle and there was a cigarette in his teeth. The horse cleared the creek with a bound, but the rider quickly brought it down to a trot again. Though moving fast Boyce got the impression that the fellow was not in a great hurry. Certainly he was paying no attention to what might be lurking along his trail. He was a stranger to Boyce.

Before the man was scarcely out of sight Ed left his shelter and doggedly took up the trail. He didn't expect to keep up with the man by any means, but he hoped that the daylight would last long enough for him to follow the tracks until they arrived at their destination. He was sure that the man had not come through Mormon Gap, for his horse had looked comparatively fresh, and at that time of day he was almost assuredly on his way to the place where he meant to spend the night.

Boyce moved rapidly with the desire to follow by ear as long as he could, and unexpectedly he discovered that his man had slowed down to a walk. By a sudden spurt he was able to come again in sight of his man, and as he did so the fellow turned abruptly from the main trail and took an extremely dim one which in the main followed the course of the little creek.

From then on Boyce had his work cut out to stay within sight or sound of the outlaw, but he stuck it out over the dim, crooked trail until the fellow finally drew his horse to a stop in front of a small cabin which was invisible from anywhere more than fifty feet away. Boyce was puffing badly and he was glad that the chase was over. While he caught his breath he watched the man he had followed unsaddle his horse, pick up a pair of hopples and disappear down over a steep bank behind the cabin. Ed was pretty sure that there was nobody around or he would surely have come to the door when the man rode up. It was a rather desperate situation and required desperate measures to deal with it. Having had his patience rewarded, he decided that it was time to take a chance. He got up from where he had dropped on one knee and swiftly crossed the open space to the cabin door. If there should be somebody inside, he knew that he would be in an uncomfortable position, but if it was empty as he thought, then the outlaw would be the surprised one when he returned.

With his hand on the butt of his gun, he thrust open the cabin door and stepped inside. A moment later a little exclamation of astonishment escaped his lips. There was a man inside the cabin, but a man whose hands and feet were tied to a bunk, and whose face was the picture of more misery than Boyce had ever seen.

It was Hung Fat.

Boyce crossed the room with two strides. "Hung Fat! What on earth are you doin' here?" he demanded.

The Chinaman tried to answer, but his words were unintelligible. Then Boyce saw that his neck was swollen and was ringed with hideous scabs from many rope burns. He could see, too, that the Celestial's feet were in a terrible condition. A great anger seethed over Boyce at this evidence of brutality.

"Try tuh speak, Hung Fat," he urged. "Do you know where Miss Ellen is?"

Again the Chinaman tried to speak, but his words were an indistinguishable jumble of sound.

Boyce plunged his hand into his pocket and, bringing out his pocketknife, he cut the cook loose with two swift strokes. Then he strode to a water bucket and pressed a dipper of cold water to the man's lips. Hung Fat drank greedily but with difficulty.

Boyce was about to try to question him again when he heard the man he had followed coming back. With a gesture he commanded Hung Fat not to move, while he stepped swiftly to one side of the door. A moment later the outlaw, a beetle-browed fellow of middle age with a tobacco-stained chin, stepped inside.

"Well, Chink, how d'ye feel?" he asked with a chuckle. But almost instantaneously he sighted

Boyce. The latter had not even had a chance to order him to put up his hands.

"Who the—" he demanded, but without waiting for a reply or even to finish the inquiry he went for his gun. The fellow was as swift as he was deadly, and only the fact that Boyce had his hand on his gun and was expecting such action saved him. Boyce's shot was just the length of an explosion ahead of the other, but not enough to more than unsettle the other's aim. But as he fired he flung himself sideways against the wall, and the outlaw's bullet tore through the side of his shirt without doing harm.

Boyce fired again, as he saw his antagonist trying to raise his gun again, but there was no need. The bandit had got it through the chest, and he was dying on his feet. The second shot merely hastened the collapse. The man was gasping his last as he struck the floor.

Ed's emotions were peculiar as he realized that he had killed a man—one of the dreaded Plummer's Hole outlaws—inside their own rendezvous. He stepped to the door to see if by any chance there were any more outlaws coming but all seemed quiet.

When he turned back, Hung Fat was sitting up on the bunk, and making queer noises which soon began to have the semblance of human speech.

"Belly glad boss man come. Hung Fat been damn sick man," he got out finally.

"But who brought you here and do you know anything of my sister?" Boyce implored.

"Damn Skelly fetchee," Hung Fat informed. "Long time makee Hung Fat walk. Nex' day lide heah all samee slack of flowah on topside hloss."

"But Miss Ellen—where is she? Did they bring her along?" Boyce queried frantically.

"Missee Ellen? No, she go Daggett. She leave note by Hung Fat to glive boss man, but damn Skelly come along tly to makee tell which way Miss Ellen she glo. Then tly to gittee note—dlag belly much, but no glet."

"My God, are you tryin' tuh tell me that you've got a note from Ellen to me?" Boyce cried.

"In tail of jacket," Hung Fat answered composedly, and by dint of great contortions of his body he succeeded in twisting the garment around until he could get at the note. Boyce seized it eagerly and with astonished eyes read his sister's simple explanation of her absence from the ranch.

All the strength went out of Boyce's legs and he dropped weakly upon the bunk. All the time he had been thinking of her as being helpless in the hands of the unscrupulous outlaws, she had been safe in Daggett! What a fool he had been, he thought at first. But the evidence——

Suddenly he realized what a tremendous injustice he had done Ina Bidwell. This note and the one he had found on Ellen's bed enabled him to understand everything. Instead of luring Ellen into the hands of the Highhouses and the Plummer's Hole bandits, Ina had done her best to save her.

"I've treated her rotten—rotten!" he said aloud in agony of soul. "I've got to go back and square myself."

"Missee she tink you tleat belly good," Hung Fat consoled, misunderstanding the foreman's remorse.

"You took all this abuse rather than give up this note! You're some man yourself, Hung Fat," Boyce said earnestly.

XIX

A BULLET IN THE BACK

When Ina revived from her swoon it was only to fall into a deep sleep, though indeed she never fully recovered consciousness. She was finally revived by somebody shaking her by the shoulder. She sat up with a jerk, and with difficulty broke off a scream in the middle and smothered it. Her surroundings were strange. She was in a low-roofed room with the barest of furnishings, but she recognized Ace Highhouse standing over her, and her memory quickly began to function. She supposed that she was in Ock Highhouse's cabin.

"Well, how d'ye feel?" Ace queried, not unkindly.

"All right," she answered. There was a coarse blanket over her and she felt tentatively to see if she was undressed. She still wore her shirt and breeches, but her boots were gone. She saw them lying on the floor, and she almost made a panicky move to ascertain if the letters were still where she had left them. She restrained herself in time, but she realized that their hands must have been right over the letters when they were removing her boots.

"Able tuh take a little ride?" Ace asked.

"Where?"

"Yuh'll find that out later. As a matter o' fact, yuh'll have tuh take the ride anyway—unless yuh've decided tuh come clean about them letters," he told her.

So they had not found the letters! That gave her a thrill of exultation which sent new life through her body. She was again the old, fighting Ina.

"Why move me?" she asked. "I'm not complaining."

A frown darkened his face. "If yuh won't play the game, yuh'll have tuh stand the consequences," he told her. "We're goin' tuh hold yuh till yuh come across with them letters, an' somethin' has come up which may make us do more than hold yuh. I don't want tuh see yuh tortured, but I'm gonna have them papers."

"Ace, what are you going to do?" she gasped, a cold shudder of fear running over her. His manner indicated that he was not in the least bluffing.

He smiled grimly. "If yuh don't tell me what I want, Ina, I'm gonna break every one o' your fingers. An' if that don't open yore mouth I'll think of somethin' else."

"You—you—couldn't!"

"Nothin' easier. I could snap them little bones o' yours like they was wheat straws."

"You'd do a thing like that? You don't mean it, Ace."

She was as brave as the next, but the appalling prospect of such torture made her actually ill.

"I got to. It means too much to us. But that damn

Sheriff has been pesterin' around here to-day an' I've got tuh take yuh where I know nobody kin hear yore yells. Here's yore boots—put 'em on. If yuh won't come 'long peaceably I'll take yuh anyway, so yuh'd better not make any trouble."

"Ace, don't make me go!" she begged. "Go some place else, Ace, an' make a man of yourself. If you'll do that for just a year an' still want me to marry you, I'll join you any place you say. I give you my word I will."

"I know what I'm doin'," he declared hotly. "Git them boots on. I'll have Ock's wife give yuh somethin' tuh eat before we start."

He stepped to the partition door, and Ina reached swiftly down below her knee and made sure that the letters were still in place. She raised the blanket and saw that the ends of the letters had worked down until they were in sight. Had they removed the blanket from her they would certainly have seen them. She worked them deftly back out of sight, and pulled on her boot. Ace turned just then and she put the other boot on more leisurely.

Mrs. Highhouse, a tall, jaundiced-looking woman, brought her food, but the woman appeared to have no interest in anything that went on. Despite her predicament Ina ate heartily.

When the meal was finished there was considerable signaling between the men at the house and young Buck, who was watching from the ridge top. Besides

Ace, Brig, Ock and Folland Highhouse were present when the girl stepped outside. The two old men glowered at her and Folland gave her a sinister smirk.

"You fellers keep out of this," Ace ordered. "Dad, you can go with me if yuh want to, but I'm runnin' the show."

Ina failed to see anything of her brothers. "How is Quall?" she asked.

"Still breathin'," Ock answered grudgingly.

"Where is he?"

"We had tuh move him where that damned Sheriff couldn't run across him," was the reply, and she could find out nothing more.

Checkers had been saddled and brought up for her to ride, and after a moment of indecision she swung into the saddle. She had resolved never to weaken, and nothing was to be gained by showing opposition where there was no hope for success. With a man on each side of her she was started up the cañon.

The Highhouses were grimly silent, but their silence was more terrifying than anything they could have said. Ina could not keep from looking at her strong but shapely fingers. Would they, in a little while, be twisted and broken? She had been proud of her hands. If Ace did as he threatened, instead of being beautiful, they would be forevermore misshapen and grotesque. It caused her more dread than the prospect of the physical pain; though she wondered if she would be able to stand it when the ordeal began. Her will was strong, but she knew that it might not be possible to keep the words from slipping from her lips when the bones began to crack.

They soon left the cañon they were in and wound their way up toward the highest and roughest country on the range. They rode around the side of a high, rocky pinnacle, and then dropped abruptly down into a blind cañon, where they came upon an old log cabin against the hillside. Ina thought she knew the Highhouse hills fairly well, but she had never heard of the existence of this cabin. However, the country had once been prospected, and there were a number of these old prospectors' cabins scattered about. It was not strange that she had not heard of this one. But it was a place where the most diabolical deeds could be performed with perfect safety.

"Yuh think yuh kin han'le this alone, Ace?" Brig broke the silence to ask.

"Shore I kin," Ace assured him.

"Well, don't weaken. We simply gotta have them letters before Dice gits away with them cattle. If we don't we'd just as well pull out."

"You take care o' Dice. I'll see that Ina comes through," Ace said confidently.

"Tuh think that that bank robber would double-cross us because he found out we was in this hole," old Brig gritted. "But unless we git these letters we can't do a thing. He just says the game's finished an' he's gonna git what he can while the gittin' is good."

"Well, stop him," Ace said. "There's as many of us as there is of them."

"It's no use, Ace. We'd git the worst of it. An' if we can't git control of the Clawhammer again, the stuff is off anyway."

"Anyway, we can make 'em kick in with our share," Ace declared.

"Dice refuses tuh give up a cent, an' he knows we ain't got no way tuh make him. But if he finds out that we can still han'le the situation here, he knows that there's more money in lettin' the Clawhammer stock alone an' keepin' the trail open. So git them letters before to-morrow if yuh have tuh break every bone in her body," old Brig rumbled.

They ordered Ina to alight, and pushed her into the moldy, evil-smelling cabin. Brig stood guard over her while Ace did something with Checkers and his own horse, and then Brig took his departure. Ace stepped inside the cabin and stood staring at her, his hands upon his lean hips.

"Well, shall we begin?" he asked.

Ina had been thinking rapidly. That she had been brought up here so that her cries could not be heard was probable. She also guessed that it was part of a bit of elaborate stage setting on the part of Ace to frighten her into yielding before he had to resort to the thing he had threatened. She knew Ace well enough to know that he would not back down. He would go ahead and break her fingers one after the other if he had to, but he would prefer not to have to do it.

She was also trying to figure out the meaning of what they had said about the Clawhammer stock and Joe Dice, and she believed she had it. The Plummer's Hole outlaws realized that the game they had played for so many years with the coöperation of Brig Highhouse was about over. Most of the Clawhammer cattle had been rounded up near the end of Mormon Gap. While the Highhouses were trying to force her to give up the incriminating letters, Dice and his crew would trail the cattle into Plummer's Hole and dispose of them with one bold stroke.

She remembered Skelly's thinly veiled accusation that Dice meant to double-cross the Highhouses, there on the ridge the day she had almost been killed, and Dice had not really denied it. Brig Highhouse, she believed, was wrong in thinking that the recovery of the letters would stop the wholesale theft of the cattle.

The affair had become so mixed up that she did not know what to do. If she persisted in holding out the letters, it might turn out that it would make her an inactive accessory in the theft of the cattle. To give them to Ace now might precipitate a fight between the two outlaw factions, though it seemed doubtful that the Highhouses would dare to tackle the tougher gang. Anyway she figured it, giving up the letters meant the surrender of the only weapons she had. Even if defeated, there was no telling what the Highhouses might do to Ed Boyce. She had chosen her line of action and she resolutely determined to follow it. Let Ace Highhouse do his worst; she would never tell so long as she was in her right mind.

She advanced to meet him and held out her right hand. "We'd just as well git it over with," she said.

Ace took her hand in his huge paw, and almost crushed it as he merely closed down. She shut her eyes and bit her lower lip in expectation of the impending pain. She vowed that she would not make any outcry until she had to. For several minutes she stood there waiting, but nothing happened. She opened her eyes and saw that his face was white.

"What're you waitin' for?" she asked.

"Gawd, Ina, don't make me do this," he implored. "I kin do it if I have to but it ain't easy. Come on, an' tell me where they are." He walked over to an old bunk and dropped down upon it and ran his fingers through his hair.

She had never been so near to giving up as now. She knew that he would go through with what he started, but it would be torture for him as well as her. It was a surprise to her to find that he had feeling of any kind. But while she was hesitating he flew into a rage.

"Damn yuh, girl, you will tell me. Yuh've played with me just long enough. Yuh won't have them purty hands when I git through with yuh," he gritted.

He sprang across the floor, seized her right wrist with one hand, and bent the little finger inward and back between his thumb and forefinger. The agony was excruciating. She bit her lips till the blood ran, but could not stifle the cry of pain. His teeth were clinched and he redoubled the pressure. Her knees buckled and she would have fallen to the floor had he not held her up by the wrist.

"Come on—out with it!" he hissed.

"Never," she gasped.

He had not yet broken a bone, but suddenly he bent the finger backward. Another second and the bone would snap. But before he could finish the act the cabin reverberated with the sound of a revolver shot. Ace gave an explosive cough; he relaxed his hold upon Ina and she dropped to the dirt floor. She had had her eyes closed, but as she opened them now she saw a look of the utmost bewilderment upon Ace's face. His knees were buckling, and he was pawing at the air in an endeavor to maintain his equilibrium, but without avail. He toppled to the floor like a tree severed from its stump, and even as he was falling a second bullet struck him in the back.

Ina turned her horrified gaze toward the door, and saw the grinning face of the outlaw Skelly leering at her. A smoking six-gun was in his hand.

"Looks like I came in the nick o' time," he smirked.

He had saved her from torture, but Ina would far rather have trusted herself with Ace Highhouse and his brutality than with this grinning assassin.

XX

AN OUTLAW KEEPS A PROMISE

For a moment Ina gazed at the cowardly man who had shot Ace Highhouse in the back, and he caught the inexpressible loathing in her mind, for the grin faded from his face and was superseded by a threatening snarl.

Ina got slowly to her knees, and then suddenly made a lunge for the gun in Ace Highhouse's holster. She caught the handle, but before she could drag it out Skelly had leaped across the intervening distance and pushed her away with a thrust of his hand.

"You don't need that, dearie," he laughed. "I'm here. I'll protect yuh."

"You—you cowardly cur," she shot out in a low tone.

The man stopped in real or pretended amazement. "Well, don't that beat hell?" he demanded. "Here I save yuh from bein' manhandled, an' yuh call me names! What's wrong with yuh?"

Ina got slowly to her feet, and started for the door. Skelly placed himself in the aperture, and grinned like a monkey.

"Will yuh let me pass?" she demanded.

"Depends. If I let yuh pass, will yuh take a little ride with me?"

"No."

"Don't be too sure, girlie," the fellow snarled. "That Boyce gal is the heifer I wanted tuh git my twine on, but you'll do. You're goin' with me tuh Plummer's Hole."

"Not alive, I'm not," she retorted quietly.

"Say, you're makin' a plumb fool o' yoreself," he said, losing his temper completely. "What d'ye think I trailed yuh up here for? I didn't have anything against Highhouse—only that my boss didn't want him tuh git them letters you got. Where are they anyhow?"

"I wouldn't tell Ace—I certainly won't tell you."

"No difference—just so we keep the Highhouses lookin' fer 'em till we git theirs and the Clawhammer cattle into Mormon Gap. But you an' me are goin' through ahead of the cattle."

Skelly had returned to the Clawhammer range after taking Hung Fat into Plummer's Hole. Being a natural spy and a skulker, he had been sent by Joe Dice to keep an eye upon the Highhouses. While young Buck Highhouse was keeping watch from the ridge on one side of his father's ranch, Skelly was watching from the other. He had seen Brig and Ace leave the ranch with Ina apparently their prisoner, and he had followed at a discreet distance. When Brig turned back Skelly had gone on, intent upon a game of his own.

It seemed that luck had been with him, for under ordinary circumstances he would have been no match for Ace Highhouse. But the whole range was in a ferment and other persons were on the move of whom he knew nothing.

"I'd die before I'd go with you, you snake," the girl hissed.

"Would yuh? Well, yuh ain't got no option." He sprang forward and seized her roughly. Ina struggled valiantly, but lacked strength to oppose him. He twisted her arms cruelly behind her back and lashed them together with a tough piece of whang leather he took from his pocket. With the free end of it, he tied her securely to the old bunk; forcing her to her knees in the dirt, and tying her so that she was utterly helpless.

"I reckon that'll hold yuh till I git yore horse," he gloated. "When I say fer people tuh come with me they come."

Leaving her there helpless the fellow went outside to look for the horses which he knew were somewhere about. As he returned, leading both Checkers and Ace's horse, a man walked out of the trees on the other side of the house.

Jack Parmer was a comparatively new man with the Plummer's Hole gang, and not trusted with all its secrets, but when Joe Dice, the leader, had given orders that all the Clawhammer cattle, and as many of the Highhouses' various brands as could be gathered, should be stolen, Parmer had to be told along with the rest. He, with the rest of them, knew the plight the Highhouses were in, for Brig had had to explain his reasons for withdrawing from the round-up with his clan. He heard that they were going to conduct a vigorous search for Ina Bidwell, and knew it boded ill for the girl if she was caught. He learned, along with the others, that she had been captured, and he remembered his promise to oppose the outlaws if they resorted to crimes which were beyond his capacity to stand. He had resolved to help Ina if it were possible at all, and when he heard Joe Dice order Skelly to spy upon the Highhouses, and if possible see that they did not get the letters they wanted, too soon, he had wisely decided that the best way for him to help Ina was to keep his eye upon Skelly.

It had been exceedingly hard to do, but was made possible because Skelly had been too intent upon following those ahead of him to look back. Parmer had been obliged to hide when Brig Highhouse went back, and had almost lost track of the man he was following. He knew that Ina and Ace Highhouse were ahead of him, and he had a premonition of impending tragedy.

He was circling the pinnacle with the utmost caution when he heard two distant revolver shots in rapid succession. He was positive in his own mind that either Ace Highhouse or Skelly was dead, and he knew that in either event Ina was at the mercy of the other one. All the latent manhood in him came to the surface. He was no gun fighter like either one of those others, and he had no stomach for hot lead. He was genuinely frightened, but he would not turn back.

He dared not ride in openly on his horse, so he left the animal and took to the brush on foot. When he came to the cabin and saw Skelly's horse standing close by he sensed that if Ina was around she must be in there, and he started across to the door, but just in time to meet Skelly coming back with the horses.

"What's up Skelly?" he demanded nervously.

The other man didn't answer. His eyes were hard and his lips were drawn back cruelly. He had just killed one man, and it gave him an ecstasy of superiority. He knew that Parmer must have followed him there, and he guessed the younger man's purpose in coming, but he felt only an overwhelming contempt for the other's nervousness, which Parmer couldn't hide.

"What's the big idee in follerin' me, Parmer?" he shot out. His eyes glittered like a rattlesnake's, and his hand was going down toward his gun. Parmer knew what was coming but the deadly assurance of the other flustered him. He grabbed for his gun, but he had just got it out of the holster when Skelly's bullet struck him square in the stomach. With a groan of terrific pain he doubled over and fell to the ground. In his dying agony he writhed and groaned horribly, but his hold upon the handle of his gun did not relax.

Skelly came over and gloated. "So yuh'll try tuh butt in on my game, will yuh?" he jeered. "I could use another bullet and put yuh out o' yore misery, but I want yuh tuh live long enough tuh see what I do tuh that girl. That's what brung yuh here, I reckon."

Despite his acute suffering Jack Parmer caught the meaning of the other man's words. He saw Skelly walking toward the cabin. Gritting his teeth he raised his gun, and forced himself to cease writhing long enough to pull the trigger. The bullet struck Skelly under a shoulder blade and ranged upward through a lung. The man didn't live ten minutes.

Ina had heard every word, and through the open door she saw Skelly fall. Apparently they had killed each other—and she was tied up as helplessly as a hog-tied calf. Thought of being left there in that dingy old cabin, perhaps to die, sent her into a frenzy.

"Jack! Jack!" she called wildly. "Can you hear me?"

"I hear yuh, Ina, but, I—I'm done for. Why don't yuh come out. I—got—Skelly."

"I'm tied up here, Jack. Oh, can't you crawl over here?" she pleaded.

Painfully, and with the speed of an infirm snail, he began to crawl toward the cabin door. He was dying, and only by the sheer will to live until he could reach the girl did he fight off the blackness which would have relieved him from his pain.

Inch by slow inch he made his way toward the cabin door. Finally he reached it, but it seemed that he had not sufficient vitality left to drag his mangled body over the rotting sill. Ina strained desperately against the thong that held her fast, but it would not yield. She could only encourage the dying outlaw with words.

At last he got his body over the obstruction, and wormed his way slowly across the few feet that remained. He left a trail of blood behind him, and his face wore the gray mask of death.

"A knife, Jack—have you got a knife?" she gasped.

"Got one—Ina. I'll—make it," he gasped. He stopped, and with much effort and pain succeeded in withdrawing the knife from his pocket. It had still to be opened. He got it over to the other hand and touched the blade. But before he could do more, a convulsive tremor ran the length of his body. For an instant his eyes mutely asked forgiveness for his failure and then his head dropped upon his arm. He was dead. The unopened knife lay directly before Ina's eyes—but she could never use it.

For the second time that day Ina fainted.

Voices finally beat upon the girl's ears as though from a great distance. Soon they sounded louder, and she struggled back to consciousness, as something cold and wet splashed upon her face. She opened her eyes, and they fell uncomprehensively upon Dan Dixon. He was sprinkling water upon her from his hat.

"Gosh, Miss, I'm glad tuh see yuh open them eyes," he exclaimed.

"Wh-where am I?" she cried, trying to sit up, and looking wildly about her. Strong, but strangely gentle arms held her firmly.

"Take it easy, ma'am. You're all right now," soothed Don Dixon. She discovered that her head was in his lap.

"Dead men!" she gasped incoherently. "There's dead men here!"

"Not now, lady," Dan said gently. "There's no dead men in here." He did not tell her that the three dead men were just outside.

She quickly began to regain her composure, but with it came clear recollection of what had happened at the cabin. "How did you happen to be here?" she asked.

"That's maybe a long story," Dan said. "First Ed, our boss, yuh know, told us his sister had been abducted, an' that he was goin' tuh hunt for her. He didn't show up no more an' the round-up kinda broke up. We saw it was unhealthy for us around there an' we wanted tuh see what had become o' Ed anyway. He'd told us you was responsible for Ellen bein' took, an' we saw you talkin' tuh Jack Parmer there at the round-up yesterday, an' we just figgered that the best way tuh git in touch with things was tuh keep our eye on this Parmer. We did, an' we found ourselves follerin' a whole parade up here—an' this is what we found."

"An' we're still a long way from havin' the straight o' things, though it does look like we mighta been mistaken about you an' Parmer," Don prompted.

Ina struggled to a sitting posture, and looked toward where Ace and Jack had died. The Dixons had been thoughtful enough to cover up the blood after removing the bodies.

"You've got everything wrong," she said, "just like your foreman did. His sister was never kidnaped. She's in Daggett—safe."

Without restraint she told them the straight of things, and they listened wonderingly.

"If that's true my hat's off to yuh," Dan Dixon said earnestly. "An' to Parmer. He had guts."

"But them letters yuh mentioned," said cautious Don. "If they tried so hard tuh git 'em an' couldn't—where are they now?"

"Take off my right boot," she requested.

A moment later she wiggled the letters out from their place of concealment and handed them to Dan. He read them carefully, handed each one to Don as he finished, and when they had both read them he handed them back to her.

"I beg yore pardon, Miss, for ever doubtin' yore word," he said humbly. "If there's anything we can do, just give the order."

"You'll do that?" she asked.

"Anything yuh ask," the twins replied in unison.

"Then listen: Mr. Boyce must have gone to Daggett. But while he's there the outlaws from Plummer's Hole are going to steal all the Clawhammer cattle. You boys can't stop 'em, but you can trail 'em an' see which way they go after they git through Mormon Gap. Blaze some trees or spit tobacco juice on the rocks—do anything to mark the trail. I'll take these letters to Daggett an' make the Sheriff organize a posse to trail you," she planned rapidly.

"Miss Bidwell, when it comes tuh quick thinkin' you've got any man beat," Dan said. "We'll do our part, but do yuh think yuh're equal to the ride tuh Daggett? These hills are full of Highhouses, an' if you should fall into their hands again——"

"I don't think I shall," she replied. "I'll take one of those guns and I've got a good horse. I don't think they'll catch me again. And anyway I think they'll all be busy in the other direction. You boys are the ones who will have to watch out for them."

Nevertheless, it was with considerable reluctance that the twins finally consented for her to attempt the ride to Daggett alone.

It would soon be dark, and they were all anxious to be away from that cabin of horrors; but the Dixons remained to unsaddle the horses of the dead men, take the bodies back inside the cabin and cover them with the saddles and blankets as best they could. Then they carried poles and brush to put across the vacant door to keep all large animals outside. After that the twins headed back toward their camp, but darkness was to prevent them from seeing what was going on at that end of the range until the next morning.

A fiery determination to end outlaw rule in the country, and make Ed Boyce understand that she was not as bad as he had pictured her, caused Ina to ride faster than caution justified. She was physically exhausted, and anxious to have the long ride over with, and so she was perhaps not so alert as she should have been. But really there was no reason to expect any more of the outlaws to be in the vicinity.

But one never can tell where a coyote will be. When the wolves are around the coyotes hang in the background. And Folland Highhouse was a coyote. He would never have dared show himself near the cabin where he thought Ace might see him, but he could not resist the temptation to sneak around and try to get a vicarious enjoyment out of the torture he expected Ina would have to endure. The fellow had realized that something had gone wrong, and like the coward he was he had gone back a little distance and hid in the brush. But when he saw Ina coming over the ridge alone he had bared his fangs.

Just as the girl trotted between two huge clumps of brush a lasso shot out like a striking snake, and her arms were pinned to her sides with a jerk.

She had done much that day. If she had not defied the Highhouses the Dixon twins would not have learned the truth about the cattle; Ed Boyce would have been trapped in Plummer's Hole, though of course she could not know that. She felt that everything, the torture, the slaughter, were useless. She would not get to Daggett, the Dixon boys might now be trapped and murdered, and the loot of the Clawhammer would be complete.

XXI

THE DEATH TRAP IN MORMON GAP

By the time Boyce got his own horse back to the cabin where he had found Hung Fat it was dark. He left the animal on the little grassy pasture where the outlaw had recently hobbled his horse. He might have returned to the Clawhammer at once had it not been for Hung Fat, but the Chinaman begged not to be left behind, and he was in no condition to travel until he had had a chance to recuperate. For that matter Boyce himself stood in need of a rest.

Despite his injuries, Hung Fat had prepared a meal by the time Boyce returned, and while they ate the Oriental told all that he knew. Skelly had brought him to this cabin, which was occupied by four other men, including the one Boyce had just killed. One of the men, he had learned, was called Joe Dice.

This man Dice had ordered an immediate return to the Clawhammer range. At first he had ordered Skelly to remain in Plummer's Hole, but the outlaw had objected so hard that it was finally decided for him to return, and the man whom Boyce had killed was to remain.

From what Hung Fat said, Boyce gathered that the entire outlaw gang of Plummer's Hole, with the single exception of the man he had shot, were on the Clawhammer range. This man had been left to guard the

Chinaman, though his real business was to keep watch at the other side of the Hole against possible invaders. Evidently he was just returning from this sentry duty when Boyce first saw him.

It gave Boyce plenty to think about. At the present moment he was absolute master of Plummer's Hole. Something of the utmost importance impended or the outlaws would never have left their stronghold in the care of but one man. And he knew that whatever had taken the outlaws away had to do with him and the Clawhammer outfit.

He couldn't be easy in his mind about Ellen. He didn't doubt that she had gone to Daggett, but her restless nature might take her back to the Clawhammer and into the hands of their foes. He was also concerned about the Dixon boys. If a wholesale robbery of the Clawhammer had been planned, the outlaws might find it expedient to murder the twins to get them out of the way. In the morning he meant to return to the range and definitely decide the question as to who was going to run the country—he, the Highhouses or the outlaws of Plummer's Hole.

He went through the dead man's pockets and in a bill fold he found a crumpled reward notice, offering $2,500 each, dead or alive, for four ex-convicts who were known to have held up a U. P. train. The pictures of the four men were at the top of the poster. Though the paper was worn thin, and broken in the creases, Boyce had little difficulty in recognizing every one of them. At the upper right hand corner was a picture of the dead man, whose name, it appeared, was Sam Holly. Opposite him was George Weeks, and below them were the two young fellows Weeks had recommended to him as good punchers, Charley Groat and Whitey Mason. On the poster the latter's name was given as Herman Groat, alias "Whitey Mason." So Boyce's first guess that they were brothers was correct.

"A fine crew of men I seem to have picked up," Boyce remarked grimly. He put the bill fold in his pocket and made sure that there was nothing else of importance on the dead outlaw. Then he dug a shallow grave, and with Hung Fat's assistance buried Sam Holly.

The next morning, as soon as they had eaten breakfast, they started back toward Mormon Gap. Hung Fat was riding the mount of the dead outlaw, and as the animal was inclined to be capricious Boyce was compelled to snub its head to his own saddle horn. It forced them to go slowly and it irked the Clawhammer foreman mightily. Though he knew he was going back into the gravest danger, he was anxious to have the final test of strength with his enemies.

He knew there was a chance that he might meet some of the outlaws in the gap as they were returning to their hang-out, and he kept his eyes always on the trail ahead. But since the narrow gorge did not run straight he was seldom able to see far ahead.

His eyebrows knitted into a puzzled frown as he thought he heard a rather strange rumbling sound from up ahead. He would have thought it thunder had not the sky been without a cloud. The sound grew louder, and then it began to dawn upon Boyce what it was he heard. A mighty herd of cattle was being driven through Mormon Gap! A few minutes later he could distinctly hear the yells of men urging the cattle on.

Boyce and Hung Fat had now just reached that part of the gap which was nearly level. Despite the Chinaman's squeals of fright, Boyce put the horses to a lope for a short distance, until the noise indicated that the head of the herd could not be more than a few thousand yards distant. At the foot of one of the faults or ledges he had noticed winding up along the side of the cañon wall he stopped and dismounted. He listened for a moment, and the conclusion came to him that there must be thousands of cattle in the herd he could hear, and he knew whom those cattle belonged to. He realized that the way the cattle had been assembled there at the south end of the range by the round-up, and before, made it possible for a bunch of hard-riding men such as the outlaws could assemble, to gather a herd of several thousand head and shove it up to the end of Mormon Gap in twenty-four hours. Of course, they could not get them all, and they would make no effort to get cattle that were hard to drive, but they could easily get from fifty to eighty per cent of the Clawhammer cattle without difficulty.

The herd was going to be stopped! How long he would be able to hold them he couldn't tell. If they couldn't kill him they would doubtless send men around to get into Plummer's Hole from the other side and so come up behind him. But until that time he resolved that the outlaws should not pass. He realized, too, that if the cattle were held up in that narrow space that there might be a stampede with disastrous consequences, or they might just pile up and smother hundreds as they milled between him and the men behind. But it were better, he thought, to have the cattle killed than to let them be stolen by this impudent band of rustlers.

He gave Hung Fat a few orders, and then began a dizzy climb up the ledge. At places it was not two feet wide. He had always turned dizzy from a height, but he kept his eyes averted from the sheer drop below and continued his climb, often on hands and knees and dragging his rifle with him.

Soon he caught sight of the head of the herd. Forty or fifty big white-faces were lining out at a three-mile-an-hour gait, and just behind them were two riders. Close behind these riders pressed other cattle, and the remainder of the herd followed in a compact, snaky line. Boyce couldn't see the tail end of the herd.

Fifty feet ahead of him Boyce saw a dip in the ledge. It curled up on the outside edge about three feet, and at the other end of the dip it made a sharp jog to the left and then ended against a high wall. It was an ideal fortification. By moving up and down he could fire from any position he wished, lying down, kneeling or standing, and always be behind shelter. And he could command a view of the gap for over a thousand yards.

The first the two outlaw point men knew of his presence was when his rifle shot reverberated through the cañon walls, and a huge steer on lead of the herd dropped dead in its tracks. Instantly the other animals in the point bunch broke back with terrified sniffs at their dead comrade. They crowded past the two riders and wedged themselves among the other cattle, which also doubled back in blind fright.

Boyce knew that the dead steer and the smell of fresh blood would do more to check the cattle than anything else he could do. No animal would pass the spot unless they were carried over by irresistible pressure from behind.

In a short time the action of the herd would be decided. The leaders were stampeding madly back, and the other cattle were turning with them. Those in the rear were still coming ahead, and the line rapidly became shorter and wider. Soon the sides of the herd were touching both walls of the cannon. Animals that tried to turn around were caught as in a vise and were unable to move. Others had their ribs crushed against the rocks. Completely terrified at finding themselves in this sort of a cul-de-sac, the animals began to bawl. The din was deafening. Some of them tried to climb upon the backs of their fellows, lost their footing and went down to be trampled to death under hundreds of sharp hoofs.

The two riders in the midst of the herd were caught, and jammed in like sardines in a can. They spurred desperately, but their mounts were shunted about helplessly by the blind movements of the herd. To keep their legs from being crushed, the men were obliged to quit the stirrups and perch perilously on top of their saddles. At last one of them, becoming panic-stricken, quitted his saddle and began to scramble madly over the backs of the cattle in a wild attempt to escape the predicament.

"Stick to yore horse, you fool," yelled the other man, but the fellow failed to heed the advice. He struggled on over the backs of two or three hundred cattle, then the herd shifted suddenly, he lost his footing and disappeared from sight like a man sinking in water. He did not reappear.

The other man shuddered and clung to his saddle horn. These men were the outlaws Hung Fat had seen at the cabin in Plummer's Hole.

While this was taking place, the two outlaws at the head of the herd had turned their attention to the man who had stopped them. The man with George

Weeks was no other than the infamous Joe Dice himself. The outlaw leader was a quick thinker.

"He's on the right-hand side of the cañon," he said to Weeks. "Hang on the left side o' yore horse, an' ride like hell till yuh git behind him. I'll stop these damn cattle." The man crowded in among the fleeing cattle just enough to make him and his horse as small as possible, yet not far enough to be dragged into the maw of the stampede. He was making Weeks take all the risk.

George Weeks knew nothing but to obey orders. He dropped far over on the left side of his horse and urged the animal forward at a dead gallop. He was no trick rider and a few inches of his body was exposed in several places. Ed Boyce felt no compunction about firing at him. Weeks had been among the most contemptible of the whole lying crew.

Boyce waited until Weeks was nearly abreast of him, then leveling his rifle at the portion of the outlaw's body that was exposed just above his horse's withers, he pulled the trigger. The bullet cut Weeks just across the flank, and knocked him from his horse. The animal raced wildly on through the gap, while, Weeks, six-shooter in hand, scrambled to his feet and began to fire wildly toward the ledge upon which Boyce was hidden. Boyce pumped in another cartridge and at Weeks's third shot he let the man have it through the body.

"That makes five thousand dollars I'll collect—if I get out of here," Boyce mused with a grim smile.

He still had Joe Dice to deal with. The outlaw leader had located Boyce by the shots the latter had fired, and he realized that there was nothing he could do against him from the back of a horse. Then, too, there was always the danger that the stampede might surge back his way, and then he would be carried along helplessly until he would be directly beneath his foe. The man doggedly determined to do something about it.

On the other side of the cañon from Boyce was another rock fault which started at the bottom of the cañon and sloped away toward the top at a sharp angle. It was far more broken than the one Boyce had chosen and, indeed, was more of a ragged place in the wall than it was a ledge. Dice suddenly turned his horse back and galloped rapidly toward the beginning of this fault. Here it was about five or six hundred yards from where Boyce crouched.

The man bent low in the saddle, and Boyce missed two shots. Changing his aim Boyce killed the horse. Dice landed on his feet and raced toward the fault; his zigzag movements again causing Boyce to miss. He got his rifle from the boot before he started, and he clung to the weapon as he reached the fault and dropped behind an out-jutting ledge. A moment later a bullet whined just over Boyce's head, struck the rock behind him and ricocheted across the cañon with an angry zoom.

This man Dice was a fighter. He was cornered, but he had also cornered the man who had trapped him. There was no way for Boyce to leave his ledge without exposing himself to Dice's fire. Boyce had sent Hung Fat back some distance with the horses, and had instructed him to return to the cabin for food, and for some utensil in which to carry water from the creek. Now he realized that unless he could dispose of the outlaw across the cañon he could get no help from Hung Fat. It might eventually terminate in a test of endurance, with the one who could stay upon the hot rocks longest without water winning.

The minutes dragged along slowly, with both men anxious to get a shot at the other, and willing to take chances in order to tease the other into exposing himself. The range was so long that it required an expert shot with a rifle to hit a mark the size of a man, but they were both just that. Their minds to a certain extent moved in the same groove. They began deliberately making wild shots in order to tease the other into making a reckless exposure.

Presently, however, Dice ceased to shoot, and for half an hour Boyce lost track of him completely. Then he suddenly caught sight of a patch of the blue shirt the outlaw wore and it was far up on the fault. It disappeared before he could bring the rifle to his shoulder. Instantly Boyce comprehended the strategy of the other. Dice's ledge rose far higher than the one Boyce was on. If the man could reach the top of it he would be able to overlook Boyce's barricade and would stand a remarkably good chance to pick him off despite the long range.

Boyce realized that he had to stop the man somewhere on his climb to the top. At the same time he mentally acknowledged the daring and the ability of his foe. Dice realized the desperation of his position, and was meeting the situation with cool-headed courage.

Ed was glad that he had resisted the temptation to fire at the place where he had seen the shirt vanish. Instead of that he deliberately began to pump lead against the rocks at the bottom of the fault as though sure that his foe was still there. Always his keen eye searched the higher portions of the fault for the outlaw to appear and finally his patience was rewarded.

Dice had come to a place where he could not go on without rounding a projecting rock within full view, if his enemy happened to be looking. It would take but a second for him to make the turn. He got cautiously to his feet, waited for Boyce to fire at the foot of the fault, and then moved swiftly to get around the obstruction. He gambled with death—and lost.

Boyce saw his opportunity and pumped in another cartridge while he was swinging his rifle up toward the new target. Dice was just disappearing as Ed ran his eye along the sights and pulled the trigger. The next moment Dice did disappear, and Boyce had the disappointed feeling that he had missed. But while Ed was regretting what he thought to be a wasted shot, Dice again appeared in sight, and this time he was falling end over end toward the bottom of the cañon. He had clung to the rocks a moment after being shot, but he was perhaps dead before he struck the bottom, a broken mass of flesh and bone. Though Boyce didn't know it then, he had added another five thousand dollars to the reward money he might collect.

Meantime another drama was being enacted at the other end of the gap, beyond the milling cattle. The outlaws had worked all night, and the last of the herd was inside Mormon Gap when the Dixon twins overtook them. They were intent only upon trailing the herd, and the stampede ahead of them came as a surprise. The first thing they knew they heard the frantic yells of the outlaws trying to keep the cattle from turning back. It was too much for their curiosity, and they rode up to where they could see the Groat brothers shooting cattle to check their efforts to get back.

"There's somethin' happened ahead, an' if we disposed o' these two hombres, what's tuh keep these cattle from stampoodlin' back tuh where they belong?" Dan demanded.

"Not a damn thing—if we kin keep out of the road," Don replied.

The sweating, yelling, shooting outlaws did not hear them until they were two rods distant. But the outlaws sensed instantly that they were caught in a trap of some kind, and without ceremony they swung their horses about and went for their guns.

From the day they had first met these four had wanted to get each other, for their dislike and rivalry was deep-seated and instinctive. Faces tense and set, they spurred their horses toward each other, their guns leaping upward as they came.

Dan Dixon was face to face with the fellow who called himself Whitey Mason. Don and the other Groat had their eyes glued upon each other's faces.

"Cross 'em, Don!" Dan yelled. It meant nothing, but it was a little trick they had often discussed if a situation like the present arose. It was designed solely to confuse their adversaries, and make them wonder what was meant. The law of suggestion worked in their favor. Almost subconsciously the eyes of each of the two young outlaws left the twin he was watching to see what the other one was going to do, and the fraction of a second's time they lost was their undoing. The guns of the Dixon twins roared like a single shot and both bullets sped true to the mark. The outlaws' guns were fired, but the bullets went harmlessly into the dirt as the men dived headlong to the ground.

The Dixons checked their mounts and swung back the other way, but they had not gone far until they saw six of the Highhouses, with old Brig at their head, charging through the gap.

"Hell of a pickle we'll be in if they turn out hostile," Dan said, checking his horse.

"Caught between them an' these cattle—not so good," Don admitted.

"I got an idee," Dan said. "That Bidwell girl went for the Sheriff. They'll shore be along soon. We can leave our horses an' climb up along these faults, one of us on each side, an' hold the Highhouses plenty busy till the posse gits here, an' they'll have tuh surrender."

"It's a fine idee—if that girl can be depended on."

"Knowin' what she's done I'd bank on her to the limit," Dan declared impulsively. "Let's feed 'em a coupla bullets tuh let 'em know we're here."

Fifteen minutes later they were joyfully trading bullets with the Highhouses.

Half an hour after they had checked the Highhouses, a man was fighting and twisting his way through the tightly packed cattle close behind them. When he sighted them his face twisted into a diabolical grin. Intent as they were upon what was in front of them, the twins were unconscious of his presence. The last of the cattle veered away from him, and with a grunt of relief the man dropped his left foot into the stirrup and dismounted. He pulled his rifle out of the scabbard, and a minute later rested the barrel of the weapon over the seat of the saddle and ran his eye along the sights—toward Don Dixon.

There came the report of a rifle, but it was not from the outlaw's gun. His weapon was knocked from his hands, and despite the fact that they were both numbed by the force of the bullet which had struck his rifle, he got them high into the air.

A few minutes later Boyce wormed his way out of the struggling herd, through which he had been following the surviving outlaw. The first the Dixons knew of his presence was when they heard the report of his rifle.

There was little time for explanations. The twins had to be content with a few brief sentences. Ed was more intent upon asking questions than answering them. They told him all that had happened at the old cabin and how Ina Bidwell had saved the damning letters from their foes.

"An' all we gotta do is wait here till she comes back with a posse," Dan finished.

Boyce said nothing. Never in his life had he been so humble. This girl whom he had treated so unjustly had shamed him with her courage.

Suddenly his eyes opened wide with amazement. Riding up the middle of the cañon was the very girl who occupied his thoughts. He could see that her hands were behind her back, and on a ledge of rock behind her Brig Highhouse appeared in full view.

"Unless you fellers up there throw down yore guns an' surrender I'll kill that gal before she goes another hundred feet," he shouted.

"He don't dare to shoot," Ina called bravely. But Ed Boyce knew that he couldn't take the chance, no matter what happened to him.

"Don't shoot, Highhouse!" he yelled. "We give up!"

XXII

THUNDERING HOOVES

When that rope came from nowhere and dropped around Ina's shoulders, she felt that it was useless to battle longer against Fate. But when she saw that her captor was Folland Highhouse, the most contemptible member of the whole tribe, her resentment flared high. Contemptible though he was, however, his strength was sufficient to hold her helpless until he could tie her to her saddle.

"Kinda surprised yuh, didn't I?" he chuckled. "How'd yuh git loose from Ace?"

"He turned me loose, of course," she said. "You'll answer to him for this trick." If that didn't scare him, she knew nothing would.

"Mebbe. But I heard shootin' up there, an' I figger mebbe Ace got his'n. Anyway, I'm takin' yuh back tuh our place tuh make sure. An' if Ace is dead I reckon yuh'll be my girl."

She gave an ironical laugh which threw him into a frenzy. "Come along," he yelled. "I'll show yuh how safe it is tuh laugh at me."

She was powerless to resist and once more she was on her way to Ock Highhouse's place. This time, she thought, she would never return. So far as she was concerned personally, she had almost ceased to care what happened.

Ina worked hard to get her arms free from the ropes, but without avail until she finally got one hand loose enough to use it somewhat, though the rope was still tight above her elbows.

"Come on—fer Gawd's sake, le's git goin'," Folland urged when they struck a wagon road, and gave the reins of her horse a jerk.

When Don Dixon had returned the three letters to her, Ina had stuck them in her shirt pocket, instead of returning them to her boot. She could just reach them with her half free hand, and jerking them out she let them flutter to the ground beside the road. She felt that she would never again escape from the Highhouses, but there was a slight chance that they might be found by somebody who was not an enemy. Folland failed to see them fall.

There was truly a sensation among the Highhouses when Folland dragged the girl back to his father's house. Old Brig was there, and with some of the others he departed at once to the cabin to see what had happened to his son. His anger was titanic when he returned. It was useless for Ina to tell him that Ace had been killed by Skelly, and that the latter and Parmer had killed each other. He hardly heard what she said, but he blamed her.

He did demand the letters again, and when she denied having them he did what he declared they should have done in the first place—had Ock's wife and daughters search her. No letters were found.

The Highhouses knew what was happening to the cattle, but it was too late to do anything about it that night. But the next day the clan decided to follow the outlaws to Plummer's Hole and demand their share. Old Brig, not knowing what had become of the damning letters, did not know what kind of a pickle he might find himself in, and so he had taken Ina Bidwell along to use as a hostage if it became necessary. The necessity had arisen when he found himself blocked in the gap by Ed Boyce and the Dixons. He had ordered the girl to ride forward toward the men he intended to make surrender. Feeling that there was no hope of escape anyway, Ina had complied without a quaver. There seemed nothing left to live for anyway.

She had cried out to Boyce not to give up, but her plea had fallen upon deaf ears. And then, before any of the men could take action of any kind, something entirely unexpected happened.

Dan Dixon was the first to notice the new menace. "Ed! Ed! Behind you! Look out!" he yelled.

Looking around Boyce saw the head of a wild stampede just behind him. Already panic-stricken in their close confinement, and anxious to turn back toward their home range, some of the cattle had been pushed by centrifugal pressure past the animals which the Groats had shot. With the smell of the fresh blood in their nostrils the animals had vented loud snorts and fled blindly down the gap. The rest followed and once in motion nothing could stop the mad stampede until the herd scattered back on the Clawhammer range.

With one glance Boyce realized that anything in front of those cattle that did not get out of the way was doomed. The man he had just relieved of his weapons was already sprinting madly toward shelter.

"On the ledge, Ed! Hurry!" yelled Don Dixon.

Boyce knew that there was barely time, but just ahead of the running cattle was Ina Bidwell, with her hands tied behind her, utterly unable to control her mount.

Whirling his horse Boyce spurred the animal to a dead run ten feet ahead of the leaders of the stampede. The roar of the stampede behind him was like rumbling thunder. The Highhouses themselves were obliged to look to their safety, and he caught a glimpse of some of them tearing down the cañon.

Ina's horse had turned, but the animal was bewildered. When Boyce got to the girl's side the cattle were pounding his legs with their ribs. With his left arm he reached out and drew the girl across to the front of his own saddle. His horse lost a stride, and they were helpless in the living current. Boyce knew that there was not one chance in a hundred that his horse could get all the way down from that rough, uneven cañon without a stumble—and a stumble meant death.

He could see but one chance and he took it. Above a fissure in the rocky wall, just above the level of the cattle's backs, was a sort of platform of rock, perhaps a rod long, and three or four feet wide. A swirl of the stampede sent his horse crashing against the rock, and on the instant Ed gave the girl a toss with all his strength that landed her square upon the rock. Then, just as his horse was swept past, Ed himself gave a lunge and his hands closed upon a jagged rock at the very end of the ledge. Had he missed or had it broken he would have died just as one of the outlaws had died not long since. The rock held; he gave his legs a swing and landed upon the platform—at the feet of Brig Highhouse.

So swift and sudden had the action occurred, so doubtful had been its outcome, that old Brig could only gaze with open mouth. But finding his foe at his feet, he suddenly came alive with the ruthless intention of throwing this impudent enemy back into the seething maelstrom from which he had just escaped. He drew back a heavy, booted foot and launched a kick at Ed's head which would have accomplished his purpose instantly had it landed.

Just in time Boyce ducked, and before the foot got back into position to sustain the weight of its owner, his hand shot out and closed around the ankle, and with a quick jerk he brought old Brig down to his own level. They rolled into a clinch.

Neither man now thought to use his gun, but both knew that this struggle was to the death. Boyce instantly found that he had a formidable antagonist—a man who knew all the tricks and turns of rough and tumble. Nor was the man old enough to be slowed up to any extent, and he more than made up for this by experience. The two men were almost of a size and their strength was equal.

Brig doubled up suddenly in an attempt to get his feet against Boyce and shove him over the edge, but by a quick roll Ed got under the man's legs, and squirmed around until his back was against the rock wall. Then Brig turned him over, and they both rolled back to the very edge where they hung for a moment almost over the backs of the charging cattle. An involuntary scream came from Ina's lips, but she was powerless to act.

Boyce was turned under and Brig's hands sought his throat. Ed found his head smashed hard against the rock and the pain made him see stars. Another such smash and he knew that he would be unconscious. With an exertion of all his strength he tipped Highhouse over against the wall. They wrenched loose from each other and got to their feet.

On such a small space the battle could not last long. With a roar of unbridled fury Brig Highhouse charged with the palpable intention of butting the younger man back over the edge of their precarious perch. Ed tried to set himself to resist it, but the rock where he stood was uneven, and at the last instant he changed his defense. Instead of meeting the bull-like rush, he dropped suddenly to his knees. Brig could not stop. His knees collided with Ed's body; he pawed wildly at the atmosphere as he lost his balance and then plunged headfirst upon the backs of the cattle. He was carried along for twenty feet between two huge steers. Then they lurched apart and he disappeared.

Ina screamed and Boyce had to turn his head away.

How it happened Boyce did not know, but he found his arms around Ina and he drew her back against the wall. He cut her hands loose and here they crouched until the last of the stampede swept past. Several times his lips were pressed against her hair, but she did not seem to notice.

When the stampede was over, the Dixon twins and the one remaining outlaw came down to join them. All were badly shaken, for they had seen that desperate encounter. There were no horses left, of course, and they plodded silently on down the cañon, wondering if the Highhouses had escaped, or if they would have to battle those gentry again.

They did encounter the Highhouses before they got out of the cañon, but they were prisoners of a posse led by Sheriff Colton and they were utterly cowed. With the posse was Ellen Boyce.

Ed's arms went around his sister and it was some minutes before either could speak.

"Ed, I feel like you'd come back from the dead," Ellen said.

"And I feel more relief than that about you," he told her earnestly.

Explanations were quickly made. Alarmed by the lack of news from the range, Ellen had persuaded the Sheriff to organize a posse that morning, and on their way to where they thought the round-up was being held, they had come upon the three letters which Ina had dropped in the road. They had gone on to Ock Highhouse's place and, after showing the letters, Ock's wife had told them the men had gone toward Mormon Gap. They had arrived there just in time to head off Ock and the other Highhouses as they emerged from the gap ahead of the stampede.

Some of the members of the posse had come as far as Ock's place in automobiles, Ellen among them, and when they got back there, Ed, Ellen and Ina got in the ranch car and returned to Daggett. Ina tried to protest, but Ellen assumed charge of her with a high hand and the girl was too tired and dejected to resist. She was utterly exhausted and as soon as they reached town Ellen put her to bed.

It was late the next afternoon when Ellen asked Ina if she would be willing to see Ed. The girl nodded and Ellen went out. Ina did not raise her eyes when he came in though she was acutely conscious of his presence.

"Miss Ina," he said softly, "you've saved my sister and me, and the whole Clawhammer outfit. I won't try to thank you but I do want to ask your pardon for the rotten way I've treated you."

"I deserved it," she said bitterly. "Roy did try to steal your colts and he tried to kill you. There's no good in a Bidwell."

"I agree with you that there's no good in a Bidwell," he said with a slight smile. "But there is good in Roy. I had a talk with him this mornin', an' he told me why he wanted to steal those colts. It was to save you from sacrificing yourself for him. His intentions were good—he just didn't understand."

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"I'm going to send him to school. You see the reward for all these Plummer's Hole outlaws totals $19,000. Allowin' $1,000 for Hung Fat, that leaves $4,500 each for you, me an' the Dixon boys. There's good stuff in Roy, an' I know he'll make us proud of him."

"Us?" she queried wonderingly.

"Why not, Ina?" he asked softly. "I've been a bone-headed fool not to understand you—but I've loved you ever since that first time I saw you there in the Greek's restaurant. Will you marry me?"

"But—I'm a Bidwell," she protested.

"Do you think I'd mind that? There's just one thing I want to know. Could you—could you ever come to care for me?"

"I do—I have," she sobbed. "But I'm a Bidwell.

I'll never marry you. You said yourself there was no good in a Bidwell."

"Ina, I had a talk with your father this morning—a very earnest talk," he said quietly. "I told him I didn't believe there was a drop of Bidwell blood in your veins, and finally he admitted it. Your mother was a widow, and your name is Wright. She married Luther Bidwell because she was poverty-stricken and she thought, if she married Bidwell, her children would have a better home. The man never told you the truth because he was afraid you and Roy would quit working for him if you knew the truth. You are free from them," he said tenderly.

Her arms stole about his neck; soft lips were pressed to his. "What are you going to do with Hank and Quall?" she asked finally. "Can't you be easy on them?"

"Don't worry about them. They've turned state's evidence against the Highhouses and they'll automatically go free."

"Will you still continue to run the Clawhammer?" she asked.

"You bet. After all, we didn't lose many cattle in Mormon Gap, and the outlaw we caught has also turned state's evidence to save his neck, and he's told us where we can get back a lot of stuff that's been stolen, includin' those Percheron colts. There'll be no more outlaws in Plummer's Hole, and, with your help, I know I'll make good."

Ina closed her eyes. Her happiness was almost more than she could bear. She had asked nothing from life except a chance for Roy. Now not only was he going to have that chance, but to her had come fulfillment of things of which she had hardly dared dream.